

Fall 1994

\$3.95 U.S. / \$4.75 Can. / £1.95 U.K.

AMAZING

STORIES

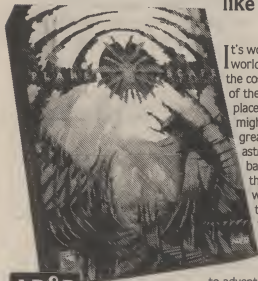
Ursula K. Le Guin
Pamela Sargent
Mike Resnick





FANTASY. . . TAKEN TO THE EDGE

**You've never experienced anything
like this before!**



AD&D
2nd Edition

It's worlds beyond our world, the great wheel of the cosmos. The multiverse of the planes is a grand place to mingle with mighty minions of the great powers, sail the astral ocean, or even battle fiendish beings on their own turf. So, where to begin? Sigil, the City of Doors, in the fantastic PLANESCAPE™ Campaign Setting that opens all planes to adventurers of all levels.

TSR #2600

Sug. Retail \$30.00; CAN \$42.00; £21.50 U.K. Incl. VAT

ISBN 1-56076-834-7

New From TSR!



AMAZING[®]

STORIES

Contents

Cover illustration by Mark A. Skullerud

I DREAM OF GENIE

4 Kim Mohan

REFLECTIONS

6 Robert Silverberg

FICTION

11 Unchosen Love by Ursula K. Le Guin

27 All Rights by Pamela Sargent

43 Natasha's Lot by Pat Troise

63 Party Favors by Alex Nathan Shumate

FICTION

- 72** The Tower by George Guthridge
- 102** The Only Gift a Portion of Thyself
by Terry McGarry
- 124** Metamorphosis by Mike Resnick
-

NONFICTION

- 115** Ideograph-Gazing by Howard Zaharoff
- 118** A Fifth Force, and Other Anomalies
That Weren't by Stephen L. Gillett
-

Volume 69, Number 2 (Whole Number 591) Fall 1994

8161-02

Publisher: Lorraine D. Williams

Associate Publisher: Brian Thomsen

Editor-in-Chief: Kim Mohan

Design and Production: Larry Smith

Marketing Manager: Jim Fallone

Circulation Manager: Janet Winters



AMAZING® Stories (ISSN 1058-0751) is published quarterly by TSR, Inc., P. O. Box 111 (201 Sheridan Springs Road), Lake Geneva WI 53147.

Subscriptions: The standard price of a subscription is \$10 for 4 issues (one year) sent to U.S. or Canadian addresses. For subscriptions sent to all other countries, the rates are \$16 for surface mail or \$25 for air mail. **Note:** All subscriptions must be paid in advance in U.S. funds only. Prices are subject to change without notice. All subscription orders should be sent to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 5695, Boston MA 02206.

Distribution: The principal distributor of AMAZING Stories in the United States and Canada is Eastern News Distributors, Inc. The magazine is distributed to the book and hobby trade in the United Kingdom by TSR Ltd.

AMAZING and the AMAZING logo are registered trademarks owned by TSR, Inc. The TSR logo is a trademark owned by TSR, Inc.

Copyright ©1994 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Printed in the United States of America. Reproduction or use of editorial content in any manner without permission is prohibited.

Second class postage paid at Lake Geneva, Wis., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

I Dream of GENie

Kim Mohan

For a while I've wondered—sometimes idly, sometimes enviously, what it would be like to be hooked into an electronic communication network: the thing that used to be called a BBS, but now I suppose is called something different.

I've gotten to know some people who do spend a lot of time on one network or another, and some of them have tried to persuade me to get on-line. "I know I should," goes my standard response, "but I'm afraid if I start, I won't be able to stop."

That's true. My choice of the phrase "hooked into" in the first paragraph above was purposeful. I tend to be obsessive about things I enjoy once I start doing them, and I'm genuinely con-

cerned that if I got to be a BBS junkie (which could easily happen), I'd be taking time away from my job in order to chat via the keyboard with my electronic friends. (Not that I don't enjoy my job, but we're talking about a whole different kind of obsession here.)

So I stayed away from the networks—until a couple of weeks ago, when the personable and persuasive Dave Gross, who works for TSR and is also a sysop on GENie, got me to agree to spend an hour being that week's special guest on the TSR.ONLINE account.

I had never logged onto GENie or anywhere else before, and I was sure I would screw up (giving me a convenient excuse for

not going through with my guest shot)—but I should have known Dave would have a way around that. Thanks to a piece of software called Aladdin (must be a connection there), all I had to do was turn on the computer and press three keys to get where I needed to go. No way I could screw *that* up. . . .

So I logged on at 8:00 on the dot (as I said to the electronic audience, I'm nothing if not punctual) and started typing. And typing. And typing. . . .

One thing I learned immediately, but still had a hard time putting into practice, was that I couldn't possibly answer every question that was tossed my way. By the time I dashed off a reply to person #1, three more people had chimed in with other questions or comments. I tried to keep up, but I felt constantly out of synch. Fortunately, nobody seemed to mind if their question or observation went unacknowledged. Of course, they had been through this before.

I also learned quickly that this sort of forum was not the place to go on at length. In response to a question about my personal history at TSR, I typed furiously for a couple of minutes before hitting the return key—and the only part of my brilliantly worded mini-biography that got transmitted was the last few words.

Dave sent me a message that no one else could read, which went something like, "I forgot to

tell you about the limit on how many characters you can send at one time." Well, live and learn . . .

Once I settled in, being careful to hit RETURN fairly often and trying hard to communicate in sound-bites instead of paragraphs, I had more fun than I ever expected I would have.

Of course, I *wasn't* by myself, and that was what was so neat about the whole deal. I've read lots of SF stories about people who develop strong friendships by modem. Some of them have been pretty good stories—but now I understand that this kind of story *isn't* science fiction. It's real. It has happened, I'm sure, and I'm just as sure that it could easily happen to me. All of the people I talked to were extremely friendly. How could I not want to "see" them again?

Dave told me afterward that I was a very good guest, and he wants me to do it again sometime. "There are things I can show you that would really be fun," he said. He isn't meaning to tantalize me, but that's what he's doing. Now that I've had a taste of what GENIE is like, I think I'm going to have to try even harder to keep from getting hooked. But if I do become a regular on the network, at least now I know I'll be in good company. ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

A few months back, the authoritative research journal *Science* carried a report of the discovery of an apparent link between one portion of a human chromosome and a predisposition to male homosexuality. The powerful and conflicting responses to the announcement of the existence of what is already being called "the gay gene" shows just how complexly interwoven science and morality have become as the twenty-first century peers over the horizon at us.

The "gay gene" label is, of course, premature and simplistic. What has been disclosed so far is this:

A research group at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, studied the family his-

tories of more than a hundred men who identified themselves as homosexuals. The scientists were surprised to discover that a great many of these men had close relatives who also were gay—to a degree far out of proportion to the generally accepted heterosexual/homosexual numerical relationship in our society. Current estimates hold that between two and four percent of American men are homosexual. But 13.5% of the men studied had brothers who were gay; 7.7% had gay cousins who were the sons of their mother's sisters; 7.3% had gay maternal uncles.

Homosexual links on the male side of the family were very much less pronounced. Not one of the 114 reported having a gay

father; just 1.7% of the paternal uncles were gay; and 5.4% had gay cousins on their father's side. The number of gay cousins on the mother's side who were the children of male uncles was notably lower, at 3.9%, than the gay sons of the maternal aunts.

The apparent conclusion that emerges from this welter of statistics is that if there is any kind of genetic predisposition toward homosexuality, it is more readily transmitted through the maternal line than through the paternal. The researchers' next step was to look closely at the large group of gay men with gay brothers in their sample, since their maternal genetic link would necessarily be closer than in cousin-cousin or uncle-nephew pairs.

This part of the investigation centered on the X chromosome, which men inherit only from their mothers. (There are 23 pairs of chromosomes in the human genetic makeup. Each chromosome in every pair is identical to its partner except in the 23rd pair, which determines the sex of the child. In women that pair consists of two so-called X chromosomes, and in men of one X chromosome received from the mother and one Y chromosome received from the father.)

Of a woman's two X chromosomes, one is inherited from her father and one from her mother, and either of these can be passed on to her sons. In any pair of brothers, then, there is a 50-50

chance that both have inherited the X chromosome that has descended in the maternal line. The Bethesda scientists took blood samples from 40 pairs of homosexual brothers and tested the DNA content of the blood cells to see how many of the sets of brothers had the same X chromosomes. The arithmetical probability was that 20 of them would; but in fact 33 of the 40 pairs of brothers were carrying identical X chromosomes. That is a strong indication that mothers can transmit to their sons, via their X chromosomes, a gene that seems to cause an inclination toward homosexual behavior.

There is nothing new about the idea that there may be a genetic predisposition toward homosexuality. As far back as 1952, a study of homosexual twin brothers by R. J. Kallman in the *American Journal of Human Genetics* pointed toward just such a conclusion. Edward O. Wilson, in his extraordinary book, *Sociobiology* (1975), considered the possibility that homosexuality might actually be a valuable genetic trait in primitive societies, arguing that homosexual members of such societies, "freed from the special obligations of parental duties, could have operated with special efficiency in assisting close relatives. Genes favoring homosexuality could then be sustained at a high equilibrium level by kin selection alone." And many other studies in recent

years have purported to show a biological basis for sexual orientation. But scientists consider the Bethesda research a significant step forward in this area.

We are still a long way from pinpointing a "gay gene," though. The Bethesda hypothesis has targeted a small section of the X chromosome known as Xq28—but that section alone contains several hundreds of genes, and even if one of them actually does govern sexual orientation, it will take a great deal of further research to discover which one, if any, it is. The Bethesda scientists themselves take a skeptical view. "Sexual orientation is too complex to be determined by a single gene," says Dr. Dean H. Hamer, the primary author of the National Cancer Institute report. "The main value of this work is that it opens a window into understanding how genes, the brain, and the environment interact to mold human behavior." Edward O. Wilson made much the same point in 1975: "If such genes really exist they are almost certainly incomplete in penetrance and variable in expressivity, meaning that which bearers of the genes develop the behavioral trait and to what degree depend on the presence or absence of modifier genes and the influence of the environment." And from geneticist Paul Billings of the Stanford Medical School comes the observation that the supposed "gay gene" may merely be "associated"

with homosexuality rather than a "cause" of it.

Furthermore, the whole study may turn out to be just a statistical anomaly. A sampling of 114 men, a few dozen of whom have gay brothers or cousins, is far from being representative of the population as a whole; and though those 33 brother-pairs with identical X chromosomes seem strongly to support the concept of genetic homosexuality, it too may turn out to be only a statistical fluke when submerged in a population of 1000 or 10,000 pairs of gay brothers, where the 50-50 chromosomal distribution may in fact prove to be the norm. So the whole notion, at this point, must be regarded merely as an interesting speculation awaiting more extensive research.

An essential aspect of science fiction, though, is to develop extrapolative conclusions from speculative hypotheses. It's a good measure of the science-fictionization of our society to observe how quickly an array of extrapolative conclusions has leaped forth here.

Those who believe that homosexuality is an innate and inescapable trait, rather than an arbitrarily chosen "preference," see confirmation of their ideas, and have been quick to seize on the political implications. If homosexuality is inborn, then to discriminate against people because of their sexual orientation is as unfair and unacceptable as to discriminate

against them because of the color of their skins. So, then, Gregory J. King, a spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign Fund in Washington, largest of the gay and lesbian lobbying groups: "We think this study is very important. Fundamentally it increases our understanding of the origins of sexual orientation, and at the same time we believe it will help increase public support for lesbian and gay rights." And Lyle Julius of San Francisco, who is gay, had a similarly favorable reaction to the idea that homosexuality is "natural," saying, "This is allowing Americans, especially middle America, to know we're all people. I have a favorite phrase, 'God works in mysterious ways, why could He have not created the homosexual?'"

But even genetic determinism is no justification for homosexuality, say those who find such behavior abhorrent. "If it's discovered that one person has a set of urges to a greater degree than another in a specific area of behavior, that does not mean the person has to yield to that behavior," said Lon T. Mabon, chairman of an Oregon anti-gay group. "Some people have said there's a genetic link to alcoholism, but that does not excuse the drunk."

And some members of the gay community, far from being pleased to hear that homosexuality may be innate, take a dark view of the Bethesda findings, as do non-gay scientists and sociologists. Darrell Yates Rist of the Gay and

Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation sees the possibility of attempts "to identify those people who have it [the homosexual gene] and then open them up to all sorts of experimentation to change them." Laura Duggan of the San Francisco organization Lesbian Avengers takes the same view: "It can lead to testing for gay babies, testing children as youngsters and trying to alter who they are." Such genetic testing, says New York University sociologist Dorothy Nelkin, co-author of a book called *Dangerous Diagnostics*, "could be used to abort perfectly healthy people, and it could be used by the military and by employers to discriminate" against carriers of the gene. Dr. Billings of Stanford Medical School makes the same point: "The military wouldn't have to ask people if they were homosexual; they could just do a blood test."

The ramifications are endless. Insurance companies, worried about the potential for AIDS infections, might demand genetic examination before issuing new policies. Parents unwilling to bring a homosexual child into the world might abort a fetus carrying the troublesome gene, or else employ technology already entering medical use to alter the gene while the child is still in the womb. Even children already born might be subjected to genetic surgery to give them a different chromosomal pattern, just as if homosex-

uality were simply a birth defect. And so on and on, as we shamble forward into the ever more intricate future.

I tend to a more cautious outlook, myself. The "gay gene," if there is such a thing, is a long way from being found; and if it can be located, it will be very hard indeed to demonstrate an inexorable and inescapable link between its presence and homosexual behavior. On the other hand, I think it's likely that if the Bethesda work is confirmed in whole or even in part a certain amount of prenatal genetic surgery may be practiced in the centuries ahead on behalf of parents determined to keep their children on the straight and narrow path. And the possibility that some people will choose to abort fetuses bearing genes indicating homosexuality—a kind of prenatal genocide—is a very real one.

But the whole area of prenatal genetic tinkering is so laden with explosive complications, and human society is subject to such unpredictable changes from one century to another, that it's rash to come to any conclusions this early about the nature of the moral, ethical, and legal ramifications that it's going to bring. Anti-homosexual feelings today are far less pronounced in our society than they were only twenty years ago. For all we know, homosexuality may be a desirable condition in tomorrow's overcrowded world, a mark of elite status, and some parents may tell the genetic engineers that they want their children to be born gay. The only thing certain, I think, is that our attitudes, our fears, and our speculations on this and many other subjects are going to seem terribly quaint to the people of A.D. 2094. ♦

Unchosen Love

Ursula K. Le Guin

If it's September (the month in which this issue was released), then it must be time for another Le Guin story. The multiple Hugo and Nebula winner contributed "The Rock That Changed Things" to our September 1992 lineup, and led off the September 1993 issue with "Dancing to Ganam." This story, says Ursula, is one of several she has been writing, "all having to do with, well, aw, shucks, love . . . And stuff like that. Intergalactically speaking."

Her latest book is "Going Out With Peacocks," a collection of poems from HarperCollins. "A Fisherman of the Inland Sea," a collection of sf stories, is due out in November from Harper Prism.

Introduction

By Heokad'd Arbe of Inanan Farmbold of Tag Village on the Southwest Watershed of the Budran River on Okets on the Planet O.

Sex, for everybody, on every world, is a complicated business, but nobody seems to have complicated marriage quite as much as my people have. To us, of course, it seems simple, and so natural that it's foolish to describe it, like trying to describe how we walk, how we breathe. Well, you know, you stand on one leg and move the other one forward . . . you let the air come into your lungs and then you let it out . . . you marry a man and woman from the other moiety . . .

What is a moiety? a Gethenian asked me, and I realized that it's easier for me to imagine not knowing which sex I'll be tomorrow morning, like the Gethenian, than to imagine not knowing whether I was a Morning person or an Evening person. So complete, so universal a division

of humanity—how can there be a society without it? How do you know who anyone is? How can you give worship without the one to ask and the other to answer, the one to pour and the other to drink? How can you couple indiscriminately without regard to incest? I have to admit that in the unswept, unenlightened basements of my hindbrain I agree with my great-uncle Gambat, who said, “Those people from off the world, they all try to stand on one leg. Two legs, two sexes, two moieties—it only makes sense!”

A moiety is half a population. We call our two halves the Morning and the Evening. If your mother's a Morning woman, you're a Morning person; and all Morning people are in certain respects your brother or sister. You have sex, marry, have children only with Evening people.

When I explained our concept of incest to a fellow student on Hain, she said, shocked, “But that means you can't have sex with half the population!” And I in turn said, shocked, “Do you *want* sex with half the population?”

Moieties are in fact not an uncommon social structure within the Ekumen. I have had comfortable conversations with people from several bipartite societies. One of them, a Nadir woman of the Umna on Ithsh, nodded and laughed when I told her my great-uncle's opinion. “But you ki'O,” she said, “you marry on all fours.”

Few people from other worlds are willing to believe that our form of marriage works. They prefer to think that we endure it. They forget that human beings, while whining after the simple life, thrive on complexity.

When I marry—for love, for stability, for children—I marry three people. I am a Morning man: I marry an Evening woman and an Evening man, with both of whom I have a sexual relationship, and a Morning woman, with whom I have no sexual relationship. Her sexual relationships are with the Evening man and the Evening woman. The whole marriage is called a sedoretu. Within it there are four submarriages; the two heterosexual pairs are called Morning and Evening, according to the woman's moiety; the male homosexual pair is called the Night marriage, and the female homosexual pair is called the Day.

Brothers and sisters of the four primary people can join the sedoretu, so that the number of people in the marriage sometimes gets to six or seven. The children are variously related as siblings, germanes, and cousins.

Evidently a sedoretu takes some arranging. We spend a lot of our time arranging them. How much of a marriage is founded on love and in which couples the love is strongest, how much of it is founded on convenience, custom, profit, friendship, will depend on regional tradition, personal character, and so on. The complexities are so evident

that I am always surprised when an offworlder sees, in the multiple relationship, only the forbidden, the illicit one. "How can you be married to three people and never have sex with one of them?" they ask.

The question makes me uncomfortable; it seems to assume that sexuality is a force so dominant that it cannot be contained or shaped by any other relationship. Most societies expect a father and daughter, or a brother and sister, to have a nonsexual family relationship, though I gather that in some the incest ban is often violated by people empowered by age and gender to ignore it. Evidently such societies see human beings as divided into two kinds, the fundamental division being power, and they grant one gender superior power. To us, the fundamental division is moiety; gender is a great but secondary difference; and in the search for power no one starts from a position of innate privilege. It certainly leads to our looking at things differently.

The fact is, the people of O admire the simple life as much as anyone else, and we have found our own peculiar way of achieving it. We are conservative, conventional, self-righteous, and dull. We suspect change and resist it blindly. Many houses, farms, and shrines on O have been in the same place and called by the same name for fifty or sixty centuries, some for hundreds of centuries. We have mostly been doing the same things in the same way for longer than that. Evidently, we do things carefully. We honor self-restraint, often to the point of harboring demons, and are fierce in defense of our privacy. We despise the outstanding. The wise among us do not live in solitude on mountaintops; they live in houses on farms, have many relatives, and keep careful accounts. We have no cities, only dispersed villages composed of a group of farmholds and a community center; educational and technological centers are supported by each region. We do without gods and, for a long time now, without wars. The question strangers most often ask us is, "In those marriages of yours, do you all go to bed together?" and the answer we give is, "No."

That is in fact how we tend to answer any question from a stranger. It is amazing that we ever got into the Ekumen. We are near Hain—side-really near, 4.2 light-years—and the Hainish simply kept coming here and talking to us for centuries, until we got used to them and were able to say Yes. The Hainish, of course, are our ancestral race, but the stolid longevity of our customs makes them feel young and rootless and dashing. That is probably why they like us.

Unchosen Love

There was a hold down near the mouths of the Saduun, built on a rock island that stands up out of the great tidal plain south of where the riv-

er meets the sea. The sea used to come in and swirl around the island, but as the Saduun slowly built up its delta over the centuries, only the great tides reached it, and then only the storm tides, and at last the sea never came so far, but lay shining all along the west.

Meruo was never a farmhold; built on rock in a salt marsh, it was a seahold, and lived by fishing. When the sea withdrew, the people dug a channel from the foot of the rock to the tideline. Over the years, as the sea withdrew farther, the channel grew longer and longer, till it was a broad canal three miles long. Up and down it fishing boats and trading ships went to and from the docks of Meruo that sprawled over the rocky base of the island. Right beside the docks and the netyards and the drying and freezing plants began the prairies of saltgrass, where vast flocks of yama and flightless baro grazed. Meruo rented out those pastures to farmholds of Sadahun Village in the coastal hills. None of the flocks belonged to Meruo, whose people looked only to the sea, and farmed only the sea, and never walked if they could sail. More than the fishing, it was the prairies that had made them rich, but they spent their wealth on boats and on digging and dredging the great canal. We throw our money in the sea, they said.

They were known as a stiff-necked lot, holding themselves apart from the village. Meruo was a big hold, often with a hundred people living in it, so they seldom made sedoretu with village people, but married one another. They're all germanes at Meruo, the villagers said.

A Morning man from eastern Oket came to stay in Sadahun, studying saltmarsh grazing for his farmhold on the other coast. He chanced to meet a Evening man of Meruo named Suord, in town for a village meeting. The next day, there came Suord again, to see him; and the next day too; and by the fourth night Suord was making love to him, sweeping him off his feet like a storm-wave.

The Easterner, whose name was Hadri, was a modest, inexperienced young man to whom the journey and the unfamiliar places and the strangers he met had been a considerable adventure. Now he found one of the strangers wildly in love with him, beseeching him to come out to Meruo and stay there, live there— "We'll make a sedoretu," Suord said. "There's half a dozen Evening girls. Any, any of the Morning women, I'd marry any one of them to keep you. Come out, come out with me, come out onto the Rock!" For so the people of Meruo called their hold.

Hadri thought he owed it to Suord to do what he asked, since Suord loved him so passionately. He got up his courage, packed his bag, and went out across the wide, flat prairies to the place he had seen all along dark against the sky far off, the high roofs of Meruo, hunched up on its rock above its docks and warehouses and boat-basin, its windows look-

ing away from the land, staring always down the long canal to the sea that had forsaken it.

Suord brought him in and introduced him to the household, and Hadri was terrified. They were all like Suord, dark people, handsome, fierce, abrupt, intransigent—so much alike that he could not tell one from the other and mistook daughter for mother, brother for cousin, Evening for Morning. They were barely polite to him. He was an interloper. They were afraid Suord would bring him in among them for good. And so was he.

Suord's passion was so intense that Hadri, a moderate soul, assumed it must burn out soon. "Hot fires don't last," he said to himself, and took comfort in the adage. "He'll get tired of me and I can go," he thought, not in words. But he stayed a tenday at Meruo, and a month, and Suord burned as hot as ever. Hadri saw too that among the sedoretu of the household there were many passionate matings, sexual tensions running among them like a network of ungrounded wires, filling the air with the crackle and spark of electricity; and some of these marriages were many years old.

He was flattered and amazed at Suord's insatiable, yearning, worshipping desire for a person Hadri himself was used to considering as quite ordinary. He felt his response to such passion was never enough. Suord's dark beauty filled his mind, and his mind turned away, looking for emptiness, a space to be alone. Some nights, when Suord lay flung out across the bed in deep sleep after lovemaking, Hadri would get up, naked, silent; he would sit in the window seat across the room, gazing down the shining of the long canal under the stars. Sometimes he wept silently. He cried because he was in pain, but he did not know what the pain was.

One such night in early winter his feeling of being chafed, rubbed raw, like an animal fretting in a trap, all his nerve ends exposed, was too much to endure. He dressed, very quietly for fear of waking Suord, and went barefoot out of their room, to get outdoors—anywhere out from under the roofs, he thought. He felt that he could not breathe.

The immense house was bewildering in the dark. The seven sedoretu living there now had each their own wing or floor or suite of rooms, all spacious. He had never even been into the regions of the First and Second Sedoretu, way off in the south wing, and always got confused in the ancient central part of the house, but he thought he knew his way around these floors in the north wing. This corridor, he thought, led to the landward stairs. It led only to narrow stairs going up. He went up them into a great shadowy attic, and found a door out onto the roof itself.

A long railed walk led along the south edge. He followed it, the peaks

of the roofs rising up like black mountains to his left, and the prairies, the marshes, and then as he came round to the west side, the canal, all lying vast and dim in starlight below. The air was soft and damp, smelling of rain to come. A low mist was coming up from the marshes. As he watched, his arms on the rail, the mist thickened and whitened, hiding the marshes and the canal. He welcomed that softness, that slowness of the blurring, healing, concealing fog. A little peace and solace came into him. He breathed deep and thought, "Why, why am I so sad? Why don't I love Suord as much as he loves me? Why does he love me?"

He felt somebody was near him, and looked round. A woman had come out onto the roof and stood only a few yards away, her arms on the railing like his, barefoot like him, in a long dressing-gown. When he turned his head, she turned hers, looking at him.

She was one of the women of the Rock, no mistaking the dark skin and straight black hair and a certain fine cut of brow, cheekbone, jaw; but which one he was not sure. At the dining rooms of the north wing he had met a number of Evening women in their twenties, all sisters, cousins, or germanes, all unmarried. He was afraid of them all, because Suord might propose one of them as his wife in sedoretu. Hadri was a little shy sexually and found the gender difference hard to cross; he had found his pleasure and solace mostly with other young men, though some women attracted him very much. These women of Meruo were powerfully attractive, but he could not imagine himself touching one of them. Some of the pain he suffered here was caused by the distrustful coldness of the Evening women, always making it clear to him that he was the outsider. They scorned him and he avoided them. And so he was not perfectly certain which one was Sasni, which one was Lamateo, or Saval, or Esbuai.

He thought this was Esbuai, because she was tall, but he wasn't sure. The darkness might excuse him, for one could barely make out the features of a face. He murmured, "Good evening," and said no name.

There was a long pause, and he thought resignedly that a woman of Meruo would snub him even in the dead of night on a rooftop.

But then she said, "Good evening," softly, with a laugh in her voice, and it was a soft voice, that lay on his mind the way the fog did, mild and cool. "Who is that?" she said.

"Hadri," he said, resigned again. Now she knew him and would snub him.

"Hadri? You aren't from here."

Who was she, then?

He said his farmhold name. "I'm from the east, from the Fadan'n Watershed. Visiting."

"I've been away," she said. "I just came back. Tonight. Isn't it a lovely

night? I like these nights best of all, when the fog comes up, like a sea of its own. . . ."

Indeed the mists had joined and risen, so that Meruo on its rock seemed to float suspended in darkness over a faintly luminous void.

"I like it too," he said. "I was thinking . . ." Then he stopped.

"What?" she said after a minute, so gently that he took courage and went on.

"That being unhappy in a room is worse than being unhappy out of doors," he said, with a self-conscious and unhappy laugh. "I wonder why that is."

"I knew," she said. "By the way you were standing. I'm sorry. What do you . . . what would you need to make you happier?" At first he had thought her older than himself, but now she spoke like a quite young girl, shy and bold at the same time, awkwardly, with sweetness. It was the dark and the fog that made them both bold, released them, so they could speak truly.

"I don't know," he said. "I think I don't know how to be in love."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I—It's Suord, he brought me here," he told her, trying to go on speaking truly. "I do love him, but not—not the way he deserves—"

"Suord," she said thoughtfully.

"He is strong. Generous. He gives me everything he is, his whole life. But I'm not, I'm not able to . . ."

"Why do you stay?" she asked, not accusingly, but asking for an answer.

"I love him," Hadri said. "I don't want to hurt him. If I run away I'll be a coward. I want to be worth him." They were four separate answers, each spoken separately, painfully.

"Unchosen love," she said with a dry, rough tenderness. "Oh, it's hard."

She did not sound like a girl now, but like a woman who knew what love is. While they talked they had both looked out westward over the sea of mist, because it was easier to talk that way. She turned now to look at him again. He was aware of her quiet gaze in the darkness. A great star shone bright between the line of the roof and her head. When she moved again her round, dark head occulted the star, and then it shone tangled in her hair, as if she was wearing it. It was a lovely thing to see.

"I always thought I'd choose love," he said at last, her words working in his mind. "Choose a sedoretu, settle down, some day, somewhere near my farm. I never imagined anything else. And then I came out here, to the edge of the world. . . . And I don't know what to do. I was chosen, I can't choose. . . ."

There was a little self-mockery in his voice.

"This is a strange place," he said.

"It is," she said. "Once you've seen the great tide . . ."

He had seen it once. Suord had taken him to a headland that stood above the southern floodplain. Though it was only a few miles southwest of Meruo, they had to go a long way round inland and then back out west again, and Hadri asked, "Why can't we just go down the coast?"

"You'll see why," Suord said. They sat up on the rocky headland eating their picnic, Suord always with an eye on the brown-grey mud flats stretching off to the western horizon, endless and dreary, cut by a few worming, silted channels. "Here it comes," he said, standing up; and Hadri stood up to see the gleam and hear the distant thunder, see the advancing bright line, the incredible rush of the tide across the immense plain for seven miles till it crashed in foam on the rocks below them and flooded on round the headland.

"A good deal faster than you could run," Suord said, his dark face keen and intense. "That's how it used to come in around our Rock. In the old days."

"Are we cut off here?" Hadri had asked, and Suord had answered, "No, but I wish we were."

Thinking of it now, Hadri imagined the broad sea lying under the fog all around Meruo, lapping on the rocks, under the walls. As it had been in the old days.

"I suppose the tides cut Meruo off from the mainland," he said, and she said, "Twice every day."

"Strange," he murmured, and heard her slight intaken breath of laughter.

"Not at all," she said. "Not if you were born here. . . . Do you know that babies are born and the dying die on what they call the lull? The low point of the low tide of morning."

Her voice and words made his heart clench within him, they were so soft and seemed so strange. "I come from inland, from the hills, I never saw the sea before," he said. "I don't know anything about the tides."

"Well," she said, "there's their true love." She was looking behind him. He turned and saw the waning moon just above the sea of mist, only its darkest, scarred crescent showing. He stared at it, unable to say anything more.

"Hadri," she said, "don't be sad. It's only the moon. Come up here again if you are sad, though. I liked talking with you. There's nobody here to talk to. . . . Goodnight," she whispered. She went away from him along the walk and vanished in the shadows.

He stayed a while watching the mist rise and the moon rise; the mist won the slow race, blotting out moon and all in a cold dimness at last.

Shivering, but no longer tense and anguished, he found his way back to Suord's room and slid into the wide, warm bed. As he stretched out to sleep he thought, I don't know her name.

Suord woke in an unhappy mood. He insisted that Hadri come out in the sailboat with him down the canal, to check the locks on the side-canal, he said; but what he wanted was to get Hadri alone, in a boat, where Hadri was not only useless but slightly uneasy and had no escape at all. They drifted in the mild sunshine on the glassy side-canal. "You want to leave, don't you," Suord said, speaking as if the sentence was a knife that cut his tongue as he spoke it.

"No," Hadri said, not knowing if it was true, but unable to say any other word.

"You don't want to get married here."

"I don't know, Suord."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't think any of the Evening women want a marriage with me," he said, and trying to speak true, "I know they don't. They want you to find somebody from around here. I'm a foreigner."

"They don't know you," Suord said, with a sudden, pleading gentleness. "People here, they take a long time to get to know people. We've lived too long on our Rock. Seawater in our veins instead of blood. But they'll see—they'll come to know you if you— If you'll stay—" He looked out over the side of the boat and after a while said almost inaudibly, "If you leave, can I come with you?"

"I'm not leaving," Hadri said. He went and stroked Suord's hair and face and kissed him. He knew that Suord could not follow him, couldn't live in Oket, inland; it wouldn't work, it wouldn't do. But that meant he must stay here with Suord. There was a numb coldness in him, under his heart.

"Sasni and Duun are germanes," Suord said presently, sounding like himself again, controlled, intense. "They've been lovers ever since they were thirteen. Sasni would marry me if I asked her, if she can have Duun in the Day marriage. We can make a sedoretu with them, Hadri."

The numbness kept Hadri from reacting to this for some time; he did not know what he was feeling, what he thought. What he finally said was, "Who is Duun?" There was a vague hope in him that it was the woman he had talked with on the roof, last night—in a different world, it seemed, a realm of fog and darkness and truth.

"You know Duun."

"Did she just come back from somewhere else?"

"No," Suord said, too intent to be puzzled by Hadri's stupidity. "Sasni's germane, Lasudu's daughter of the Fourth Sedoretu. She's short, very thin, doesn't talk much."

"I don't know her," Hadri said in despair. "I can't tell them apart, they don't talk to me," and he bit his lip and stalked over to the other end of the boat and stood with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched.

Suord's mood had quite changed; he splashed about happily in the water and mud when they got to the lock, making sure the mechanisms were in order, then sailed them back to the great canal with a fine following wind. Shouting, "Time you got your sea legs!" to Hadri, he took the boat west down the canal and out onto the open sea. The misty sunlight, the breeze full of salt spray, the fear of the depths, the exertion of working the boat under Suord's capable directions, the triumph of steering it back into the canal at sunset, when the light lay red-gold on the water and vast flocks of stilts and marshbirds rose crying and circling around them—it made a great day, after all, for Hadri.

But the glory dropped away as soon as he came under the roofs of Meruo again, into the dark corridors and the low, wide, dark rooms that all looked west. They took meals with the Fourth and Fifth Sedoretu. In Hadri's farmhold there would have been a good deal of teasing when they came in just in time for dinner, having been out all day without notice and done none of the work of it; here nobody ever teased or joked. If there was resentment it stayed hidden. Maybe there was no resentment, maybe they all knew each other so well and were so much of a piece that they trusted one other the way you trust your own hands, without question. Even the children joked and quarreled less than Hadri was used to. Conversation at the long table was always quiet, many not speaking a word.

As he served himself, Hadri looked around among them for the woman of last night. Had it in fact been Esbuai? He thought not; the height was like, but Esbuai was very thin, and had a particularly arrogant carriage to her head. The woman was not here. Maybe she was First Sedoretu. Which of these women was Duun?

That one, the little one, with Sasni; he recalled her now. She was always with Sasni. He had never spoken to her, because Sasni of them all had snubbed him most hatefully, and Duun was her shadow.

"Come on," said Suord, and went round the table to sit down beside Sasni, gesturing Hadri to sit beside Duun. He did so. I'm Suord's shadow, he thought.

"Hadri says he's never talked to you," Suord said to Duun. The girl hunched up a bit and muttered something meaningless. Hadri saw Sasni's face flash with anger, and yet there was a hint of a challenging smile in it, as she looked straight at Suord. They were very much alike. They were well matched.

Suord and Sasni talked—about the fishing, about the locks—while

Hadri ate his dinner. He was ravenous after the day on the water. Duun, having finished her meal, sat and said nothing. These people had a capacity for remaining perfectly motionless and silent, like predatory animals, or fishing birds. The dinner was fish, of course; it was always fish. Meruo had been wealthy once and still had the manners of wealth, but few of the means. Dredging out the great canal took more of their income every year, as the sea relentlessly pulled back from the delta. Their fishing fleet was large, but the boats were old, often rebuilt. Hadri had asked why they did not build new ones, for a big shipyard loomed above the drydocks; Suord explained that the cost of the wood alone was prohibitive. Having only the one crop, fish and shellfish, they had to pay for all other food, for clothing, for wood, even for water. The wells for miles around Meruo were salt. An aqueduct led to the seahold from the village in the hills.

They drank their expensive water from silver cups, however, and ate their eternal fish from bowls of ancient, translucent blue Edia ware, which Hadri was always afraid of breaking when he washed them.

Sasni and Suord went on talking, and Hadri felt stupid and sullen, sitting there saying nothing to the girl who said nothing.

"I was out on the sea for the first time today," he said, feeling the blood flush his face.

She made some kind of noise, mhm, and gazed at her empty bowl.

"Can I get you some soup?" Hadri asked. They ended the meal with broth, here, fish broth of course.

"No," she said, with a scowl.

"In my farmhold," he said, "people often bring dishes to each other; it's a minor kind of courtesy; I am sorry if you find it offensive." He stood up and strode off to the sideboard, where with shaking hands he served himself a bowl of soup. When he got back Suord was looking at him with a speculative eye and a faint smile, which he resented. What did they take him for? Did they think he had no standards, no people, no place of his own? Let them marry each other, he would have no part of it. He gulped his soup, got up without waiting for Suord, and went to the kitchen, where he spent an hour in the washing-up crew to make up for missing his time in the cooking crew. Maybe they had no standards about things, but he did.

Suord was waiting for him in their room—Suord's room; Hadri had no room of his own here. That in itself was insulting, unnatural. In a decent hold, a guest was always given a room.

Whatever Suord said—he could not remember later what it was—was a spark to blasting powder. "I will not be treated this way!" he cried passionately, and Suord firing up at once demanded what he meant, and they had at it, an explosion of rage and frustration and accu-

sation that left them staring grey-faced at each other, appalled. "Hadri," Suord said, the name a sob; he was shivering, his whole body shaking. They came together, clinging to each other. Suord's small, rough, strong hands held Hadri close. The taste of Suord's skin was salt as the sea. Hadri sank, sank and was drowned.

But in the morning everything was as it had been. He did not dare ask for a room to himself, knowing it would hurt Suord. If they do make this sedoretu, then at least I'll have a room, said a small, unworthy voice in his head. But it was wrong, wrong. . . .

He looked for the woman he had met on the roof, and saw half a dozen who might have been her and none he was certain was her. Would she not look at him, speak to him? Not in daylight, not in front of the others? Well, so much for her, then.

It occurred to him only now that he did not know whether she was a woman of the Morning or the Evening. But what did it matter?

That night the fog came in. Waking suddenly, deep in the night, he saw out the window only a formless grey, glowing very dimly with diffused light from a window somewhere in another wing of the house. Suord slept, as he always did, flat out, lying like a bit of jetsam flung on the beach of the night, utterly absent and abandoned. Hadri watched him with an aching tenderness for a while. Then he got up, pulled on clothes, and found the corridor to the stairs that led up to the roof.

The mist hid even the roof-peaks. Nothing at all was visible over the railing. He had to feel his way along, touching the railing. The wooden walkway was damp and cold to the soles of his feet. Yet a kind of happiness had started in him as he went up the attic stairs, and it grew as he breathed the foggy air, and as he turned the corner to the west side of the house. He stood still a while and then spoke, almost in a whisper. "Are you there?" he said.

There was a pause, as there had been the first time he spoke to her, and then she answered, the laugh just hidden in her voice, "Yes, I'm here. Are you there?"

The next moment they could see each other, though only as shapes bulking in the mist.

"I'm here," he said. His happiness was absurd. He took a step closer to her, so that he could make out her dark hair, the darkness of her eyes in the lighter oval of her face. "I wanted to talk to you again," he said.

"I wanted to talk to you again," she said.

"I couldn't find you. I hoped you'd speak to me."

"Not down there," she said, her voice turning light and cold.

"Are you in the First Sedoretu?"

"Yes," she said. "The Morning wife of the First Sedoretu of Meruo. My name is An'nad. I wanted to know if you're still unhappy."

"Yes," he said, "no—" He tried to see her face more clearly, but there was little light. "Why is that you talk to me, and I can talk to you, and not to anybody else in this household?" he said. "Why are you the only kind one?"

"Is . . . Suord unkind?" she asked, with a little hesitation on the name.

"He never means to be. He never is. Only he—he drags me, he pushes me, he . . . He's stronger than I am."

"Maybe not," said An'nad. "Maybe only more used to getting his way."

"Or more in love," Hadri said, low-voiced, with shame.

"You're not in love with him?"

"Oh, yes!"

She laughed.

"I never knew anyone like him—he's more than—his feelings are so deep, he's—I'm out of my depth," Hadri stammered. "But I love him—immensely—"

"So what's wrong?"

"He wants to marry," Hadri said, and then stopped. He was talking about her household, probably her blood kin; as a wife of the First Sedoretu she was part of all the network of relationships of Meruo. What was he blundering into?

"Who does he want to marry?" she asked. "Don't worry. I won't interfere. Is the trouble that you don't want to marry him?"

"No, no," Hadri said. "It's only—I never meant to stay here, I thought I'd go home. . . . Marrying Suord seems—more than I, than I deserve—But it would be amazing, it would be wonderful! But . . . the marriage itself, the sedoretu, it's not right. He says that Sasni will marry him, and Duun will marry me, so that she and Duun can be married."

"Suord and Sasni"—again the faint pause on the name—"don't love each other, then?"

"No," he said, a little hesitant, remembering that challenge between them, like a spark struck.

"And you and Duun?"

"I don't even know her."

"Oh, no, that is dishonest," An'nad said. "One should choose love, but not that way. . . . Whose plan is it? All three of them?"

"I suppose so. Suord and Sasni have talked about it. The girl, Duun, she never says anything."

"Talk to her," said the soft voice. "Talk to her, Hadri." She was looking at him; they stood quite close together, close enough that he felt the warmth of her arm on his arm though they did not touch.

"I'd rather talk to you," he said, turning to face her. She moved back, seeming to grow insubstantial even in that slight movement, the fog

was so dense and dark. She put out her hand, but again did not quite touch him. He knew she was smiling.

"Then stay and talk with me," she said, leaning again on the rail. "Tell me . . . oh, tell me anything. What do you do, you and Suord, when you're not making love?"

"We went out sailing," he said, and found himself telling her what it had been like for him out on the open sea for the first time, his terror and delight. "Can you swim?" she asked, and he laughed and said, "In the lake at home, it's not the same," and she laughed and said, "No, I imagine not." They talked a long time, and he asked her what she did—"in daylight. I haven't seen you yet, down there."

"No," she said. "What do I do? Oh, I worry about Meruo, I suppose. I worry about my children. . . . I don't want to think about that now. How did you come to meet Suord?"

Before they were done talking the mist had begun to lighten very faintly with moonrise. It had grown piercingly cold. Hadri was shivering. "Go on," she said. "I'm used to it. Go on to bed."

"There's frost," he said, "look," touching the silvered wooden rail. "You should go down too."

"I will. Goodnight, Hadri." As he turned she said, or he thought she said, "I'll wait for the tide."

"Goodnight, An'nad." He spoke her name huskily, tenderly. If only the others were like her. . . .

He stretched out close to Suord's inert, delicious warmth, and slept.

The next day Suord had to work in the records office, where Hadri was utterly useless and in the way. Hadri took his chance, and by asking several sullen, snappish women, found where Duun was: in the fish-drying plant. He went down to the docks and found her, by luck, if it was luck, eating her lunch alone in the misty sunshine at the edge of the boat basin.

"I want to talk with you," he said.

"What for?" she said. She would not look at him.

"Is it honest to marry a person you don't even like in order to marry a person you love?"

"No," she said, fiercely. She kept looking down. She tried to fold up the bag she had carried her lunch in, but her hands shook too much.

"Why are you willing to do it, then?"

"Why are *you* willing to do it?"

"I'm not," he said. "It's Suord. And Sasni."

She nodded.

"Not you?"

She shook her head, violently. Her thin, dark face was a very young face, he realized.

"But you love Sasni," he said, a little uncertainly.

"Yes! I love Sasni! I always did, I always will! That doesn't mean I, I, I have to do everything she says, everything she wants, that I have to, that I have to—" She was looking at him now, right at him, her face burning like a coal, her voice quivering and breaking. "I don't *belong* to Sasni!"

"Well," he said, "I don't belong to Suord, either."

"I don't know anything about men," Duun said savagely, still glaring at him. "Or any other women. Or anything. I never was with anybody but Sasni, all my life! She thinks she *owns* me."

"She and Suord are a lot alike," Hadri said cautiously.

There was a silence. Duun, though tears had spouted out of her eyes in the most childlike fashion, did not deign to wipe them away. She sat straight-backed, cloaked in the dignity of the women of Meruo, and managed to get her lunch-bag folded.

"I don't know very much about women," Hadri said. His was perhaps a simpler dignity. "Or men. I know I love Suord. But I . . . I need freedom."

"Freedom!" she said, and he thought at first she was mocking him, but quite the opposite—she burst right into tears, and put her head down on her knees, sobbing aloud. "I do too," she cried, "I do too."

Hadri put out a timid hand and stroked her shoulder. "I didn't mean to make you cry," he said. "Don't cry, Duun. Look. If we, if we feel the same way, we can work something out. We don't have to get married. We can be friends."

She nodded, though she went on sobbing for a while. At last she raised her swollen face and looked at him with wet-lidded, luminous eyes. "I would like to have a friend," she said. "I never had one."

"I only have one other one here," he said, thinking how right she had been in telling him to talk to Duun. "An'nad."

She stared at him. "Who?"

"An'nad. The Morning Woman of the First Sedoretu."

"What do you mean?" She was not scornful, merely very surprised. "That's Teheo."

"Then who is An'nad?"

"She was the Morning Woman of the First Sedoretu four hundred years ago," the girl said, her eyes still on Hadri's, clear and puzzled.

"Tell me," he said.

"She was drowned—here, at the foot of the Rock. They were all down on the sands, her sedoretu, with the children. That was when the tides had begun not to come in as far as Meruo. They were all out on the sands, planning the canal, and she was up in the house. She saw there was a storm in the west, and the wind might bring one of the

great tides. She ran down to warn them. And the tide did come in, all the way round the Rock, the way it used to. They all kept ahead of it, except An'nad. She was drowned. . . ."

With all he had to wonder about then, about An'nad, and about Duun, he did not wonder why Duun answered his question and asked him none.

It was not until much later, half a year later, that he said, "Do you remember when I said I'd met An'nad—that first time we talked—by the boat basin?"

"I remember," she said.

They were in Hadri's room, a beautiful, high room with windows looking east, traditionally occupied by a member of the Eighth Sedoretu. Summer morning sunlight warmed their bed, and a soft, earth-scented land-wind blew in the windows.

"Didn't it seem strange?" he asked. His head was pillowed on her shoulder. When she spoke he felt her warm breath in his hair.

"Everything was so strange then . . . I don't know. And anyhow, if you've heard the tide . . ."

"The tide?"

"Winter nights. Up high in the house, in the attics. You can hear the tide come in, and crash around the Rock, and run on inland to the hills. At the true high tide. But the sea is miles away. . . ."

Suord knocked, waited for their invitation, and came in, already dressed. "Are you still in bed? Are we going in to town or not?" he demanded, splendid in his white summer coat, imperious. "Sasni's already down in the courtyard."

"Yes, yes, we're just getting up," they said, secretly entwining further.

"Now!" he said, and went out.

Hadri sat up, but Duun pulled him back down. "You saw her? You talked with her?"

"Twice. I never went back after you told me who she was. I was afraid. . . . Not of her. Only afraid she wouldn't be there."

"What did she do?" Duun asked softly.

"She saved us from drowning," Hadri said. ♦

All Rights

Pamela Sargent

Although she has traveled several avenues of the writing and publishing businesses in a career spanning nearly 25 years, Pam Sargent is best known nowadays as the winner of a 1992 Nebula award. Far from content to rest on her laurels, she has churned out a number of new stories since then and is liable to be found in many of the magazines and anthologies currently on the shelves.

On another front, she is serving as the editor of the next three Nebula Awards anthologies from Harcourt Brace, and by the time this story is in print she will have finished work on her two "Women of Wonder" anthologies, due out from the same company.

As regards the following, she is quick to point out that "No one in this story, needless to say, resembles any of the wonderful people I've worked with over the years." Which, we would point out, is not the same as saying these people don't exist. . . .

Darcy Langton dreaded her daily journey to the post office. She knew only too well what her mailbox would yield—bills she could not pay, along with more rejections.

Lately, no one wanted to buy her stories; she wondered why editors kept encouraging her to submit them. Maybe they just wanted to keep her on tap in case the hot new writers they were buying now either priced themselves out of the market or self-destructed. Maybe they just wanted to pretend they were good guys after all, sensitive caretakers of writing talent instead of stripminers and exploiters of it. Maybe it was part of a vast conspiracy, in which editors regularly got together and cackled about all the suckers to whom they were giving false encouragement. Maybe—

Going to the post office often provoked such musings. Darcy's agent would have told her that it was simply a matter of too many stories chasing too few markets. Agents were supposed to think that way, and Leonard McDermott Lowell was more hardheaded than most, which

was one of the reasons she had asked him to represent her work ten years ago. Still, he hadn't been doing much for her lately. Maybe he was too busy hyping his hot new clients to publishers to tend to her paltry business affairs.

Her post office box was empty, except for a suspiciously thin envelope from Leonard McDermott Lowell & Associates. Darcy clenched her teeth, suspecting it was a letter telling her that Canyon Books had rejected her proposal for a new novel. She locked her box, crossed the room, and leaned against a table as she prepared to read of her doom. Disaster it would be, after six months of waiting to hear from an editor who had encouraged the submission only to lapse into a lengthy silence. Darcy would have to go back to her old job at Burns and Royal to make ends meet, assuming the bookstore still had an opening. Leonard might at least have called to tell her about the rejection, and to commiserate with her, instead of heartlessly notifying her in a letter.

She tore open the envelope. A statement from her agent fell out, along with a check. She stared at the check for a long time, not daring to believe it. Twenty thousand dollars for a new edition of her first novel, *The Silent Shriek*, and this was apparently only the first part of the advance. Leonard's statement revealed that more would be forthcoming on publication, six months from now.

Ecstasy and an overpowering feeling of relief flooded through her. She had been reprieved from the torment of having to continue working in a bookstore where her own books were conspicuously absent from the shelves and had to be special-ordered by the one or two customers who wanted to buy them during their brief duration in print.

Then she looked more closely at her agent's statement.

"Alt. Rights³," the statement said cryptically; the same notation was on the check. What the hell were alt. rights? She knew about foreign rights, book club rights, reprint rights of various kinds, but she had never heard of anything called alt. rights. And what was that ³ doing in there, anyway?

Not that she really cared where this unforeseen but welcome wind had come from—Leonard was supposed to worry about that—but it was probably in her interest to find out.

Darcy placed a call to Leonard McDermott Lowell and Associates as soon as she got home; his assistant said that he would call her later. Darcy suspected that her agent was occupied with negotiations involving one of his hot young writers, probably Desirée Thorne, that Danielle Steel clone who had just had her latest piece of banal and basic prose picked up by the Literary Guild as a Main Selection. Leonard would be too busy with Desirée's business to call her any time soon.

To her surprise, Leonard got back to her in less than five minutes.

"How about that check?" he said jovially. "What about them apples? Hope that cheers you up. Anyway, now I can tell you that Canyon turned down your *Terror Is My Middle Name* proposal two days ago."

"Uh, Leonard," Darcy murmured, "where did that check come from? Why didn't you tell me it was on the way sooner? You could have saved me a lot of worry."

"I would have told you," he said, "if I was sure I'd get the money. Frankly, I wasn't. It's for alternate rights, you see, and that's a whole new ball game."

Alternate rights? What the hell were alternate rights? But then, that was one reason she had an agent, so she wouldn't have to know things like that. A clause covering alternate rights and granting them to her agent was probably in her original book contract somewhere among the twenty-five pages of tiny type. She had stopped reading her contracts, whose prose was either indecipherable or ominous, a while ago. All the clauses and riders seemed to boil down to one assertion: Anything bad that happens to you as a result of signing this contract is your fault and not our responsibility, even if we screw up.

"What are alternate rights?" Darcy asked.

"I'll give you the short version of the story," Leonard replied, "but keep it under your hat, at least until it breaks in *Publishers Weekly* and the *Times*, which should be any day now." He lowered his voice. "See, a couple of months ago, this query came in on my E-mail. Never heard of this editor, or the publisher, but she wanted to publish *The Silent Shriek*. Well, I checked around with some other agents, and they were getting the same kinds of queries. Couldn't track down any of these publishers and editors, even though they all had New York addresses. So, on a lark, I finally E-mailed back to this mysterious editor and told her to make me an offer. She did, along with a contract that I printed out. One page, that's how long the contract was."

"One page?" Darcy said. "Why didn't she mail it to you?"

"I asked her that myself. She insisted it was valid, that if I E-mailed back my approval, money would be on the way. I figured it had to be a joke, somebody fooling around on line. I mean, who's going to offer forty-four thousand, including my percentage, to do a hardcover of a novel that took a bath as a paperback original? Not that your book wasn't wonderful, but this deal just didn't make sense. And who's going to send the best goddamned contract I've ever seen? At least it's good in terms of the writer's interests. As far as the publisher goes, they're practically giving everything away."

"I still don't see—" Darcy began.

"Well, I let her know we had a deal," her agent interrupted. "My

reply was pretty sarcastic, just so this joker would know I wasn't fooled. And then, last week, a week after I said okay, the money came—twenty-two thousand for the first part of the advance.”

“A week?” Darcy could hardly believe her ears. “A publisher sent you a check in a week?” That seemed as unbelievable as the size of the advance.

“They didn’t actually *send* it,” Leonard said. “The money showed up in my account electronically. My bank checked and double-checked, and there’s no question the money was drawn on an account in another New York bank and deposited in mine, so my bank will honor it. They’re just not sure exactly how it got into the other bank. Anyway, by then a few other agents had some idea of what this was all about. Alternate rights—that’s what we’d sold. These editors in some parallel universe had somehow managed to contact this one to buy books published here. Maybe I should say parallel universes, because it looks like there’s more than one. I compared the contract I got with one Scott Fontaney received for a client of his, and then we both talked to Mary Thalberg. It was a popular-science writer client of hers who figured out that we had to be dealing with parallel worlds.”

Leonard sighed and fell silent. Darcy had to believe him; Leonard’s skepticism about most matters was deeply rooted in cynicism and pessimism, essential qualities for any literary agent. He was not a man to fall prey to wild delusions.

“Parallel worlds?” she said at last. “But how?”

“It’s the goddamn electronic highway, or whatever you want to call it. That’s this science writer’s explanation, and a few physicists are backing him up. The computer networks and everything connected to them are so complicated now that messages between different universes are leaking into the system. At least some messages are. Right now, it just seems to be E-mail from editors wanting to buy books, their contracts, and their dough coming through electronic transfers into banks here. Don’t ask me why we haven’t heard from anybody else.”

“My God,” Darcy murmured.

“And that number 3 on your check and statement is a way of keeping things straight. Half the agents in New York got together for a powwow a couple of days ago, and we decided that none of us was going to question a good thing. Mary Thalberg and her client worked out a rough system for us to use, based on differences in the language of each contract, names of publishing firms, and what little we’ve learned from editors about their particular worlds so we can keep it straight which contract came from which universe. I mean, we wouldn’t want to sell alternate rights in Continuum 5 to a book that’s already contracted for there.”

“No, you certainly wouldn’t,” Darcy said.

Leonard went on to discuss what an inside source had told him about a meeting several New York banking executives had held with some prominent physicists hastily called in as consultants. The bankers had talked about prohibiting deposits from alternate worlds, but with the economy the way it was, they had a need for new cash flow. A physicist named Sterling Blake had apparently given the bankers the rationalization they needed by assuring them, with appropriate equations, that all alternate universes were only aspects of one reality. When the bankers looked at it that way, a deposit from a publisher in Parallel World 2 was just as sound as one from a European publisher. Actually, deposits from alternate worlds were even easier to handle, since they involved no currency conversions; everyone, so far, was dealing in dollars. The physicist's explanation might seem drawn as much from theology as from physics, but the banks would take the leap of faith. They could not ignore the situation, and might as well use it; profit was profit, whatever the source. If enough business started coming in from other universes—really *important* business, not just book deals—a lot of deficits could be redeemed.

"Who knows?" Leonard finished. "Get enough alternate moola rolling in, and the government might collect enough in taxes to make a dent in the national debt. Doesn't look like the IRS is going to make a stink—in fact, I heard that this physicist Blake was called down to Washington last night, right after the meeting with the bankers."

"Wait a minute." Darcy frowned. "I can sort of understand how money can go back and forth, but how do these alternate worlds or whatever get copies of our books?"

"You've got a modem. You're involved in that online workshop and bitch session or whatever the hell it is, aren't you? Mary's client has a theory that the texts must be leaking into these parallel worlds that way."

"Makes sense, I guess," Darcy said.

"As for your *Terror Is My Middle Name* proposal, we could try Diadem Books. They're starting a new horror line."

"I'll think about it," Darcy said. "Alternate rights. Well, if I'm getting forty grand, Desirée Thorne ought to be worth a fortune in alternate rights."

"Probably," Leonard said cheerfully. "I expect to get an offer for her novels before long."

As it happened, Darcy's agent was wrong about that.

"You'll never believe it," Jane Rubell said over the phone. "Sixty thousand smackers for *Plumbing the Depths*. And my agent thinks he'll get an offer for *Flushing Out Death*, too."

"I can believe it," Darcy said. Jane Rubell, another freelance writer

who lived in an adjoining town, was her closest friend. They often drove into New York together to see editors, pooling their meager resources by sharing a room in a rundown hotel and splitting other expenses. At other times, they got together with their colleague Arlen Williams to complain and exchange horror stories about publishers. Jane had written a series of paperback mysteries featuring a plumber who was also a sleuth, but her books had not done well, either because most plumbers didn't read or because most mystery readers weren't enthralled by plumbing. Darcy was a trifle annoyed that Jane had landed a larger advance for hardcover alternate rights to her first mystery than Darcy had for *The Silent Shriek*, but was still happy for her friend.

"I was talking to Arlen the other day," Jane went on, "and he told me he got fifty grand for a hardcover of *Warlords of Mimistapol*."

Fifty thousand for a book Arlen called one of his worst? Darcy could believe even that. She had been reading *Publishers Weekly* before Jane called, where a new article about alternate rights had appeared. Generous sums for insignificant books by unknown writers—that seemed to be the pattern. According to this article, Danielle Steel, Judith Krantz, and John Grisham had not yet received offers for alternate rights to their novels.

Perhaps that was why the trade publications weren't devoting as much space to alternate rights deals as Darcy had expected. Newspapers and television, after saturating front pages and newscasts with stories about this new development, now mentioned the subject only in passing. As Carl Sagan had so tellingly put it on *Nightline*, these other continua were really only one world with variants, one world in different states. In which case, Ted Koppel had added, it made sense to accept that fact and then go about one's business. Stranger things had happened; people had seen the Berlin Wall come down, the Soviet Union collapse, the resorts of Yugoslavia become killing grounds, and the leaders of Israel and the PLO shake hands. "Absorb the impossible and move on," Koppel's colleague Jeff Greenfield had blurted out then. "It's what we always do."

In addition to that, most Americans didn't much care if a writer was wildly successful in another country in *this* world, let alone in another universe, if he didn't make a big noise in the U. S. of A. A story about editors buying rights to obscure books wasn't the kind of news to dominate the media for long, even if the editors buying the books were in other continua. The only publishing stories that really counted to the public at large were tales of mega-advances, surprise bestsellers by former nonentities, book deals involving celebrities, accounts of lurid crimes scheduled to appear in book form before becoming television docudramas, and news of movie rights being sold to Steven Spielberg.

In spite of that, Darcy was convinced that someone like Dean Koontz would eventually nail down an alternate rights deal that would dwarf any past deal in any universe. Then CNN might again devote more than fifteen seconds to the story. In the meantime, she and Jane might as well enjoy their good fortune.

"What's the number for your rights?" Darcy asked.

"My agent's statement says 'Alt. Rights'," Jane replied. "Obviously a publisher in a different continuum is buying rights to my stuff."

"That seems to be the pattern," Darcy said. "PW claims that about fifty different universes are involved so far, and there's no overlap—they all seem to be buying different authors. Must be a pain for all our agents to keep things straight."

"Where lots of money is concerned, they always manage. Hey, I think we should celebrate. How about—"

The phone was clicking in Darcy's ear. "Hold on a second. Another call's coming in." She put Jane on hold and heard her agent shout a greeting.

"Yo, Leonard," Darcy replied.

"Ready for some more good news?" he said jovially.

"Sure."

"I heard from Elysium House today." It took a few moments for Darcy to recognize the name of her publisher in Parallel World 3. "I hope you're sitting down," Leonard went on. "They sold paperback rights to *The Silent Shriek*. Four hundred thousand dollars."

"Four hundred thousand dollars?" Darcy squeaked.

"And that isn't all. They want rights to *In Terms of Terror*. They're offering us two hundred thousand for that."

Darcy sucked in her breath.

"But I think I can get them up to three hundred."

"I promised myself I'd take a long cruise," Jane said, "if I ever made major money. Now I'm worth over a million, and I'm afraid to go out the door. I mean, a meteor might fall on me or something. That's about on the same order of probability as my becoming a millionaire."

"I know what you mean," Arlen Williams muttered. "I've got all this money coming in, and all I've done so far is tell my son he can go to Harvard and take his junior year abroad besides. Thing is, I never expected to have much dough, so I don't know what to do with it all."

"You're afraid the money'll dry up," Darcy said. "We're all just too damned used to being poor."

"That's part of it," Arlen said as he dipped a small silver spoon into the caviar. "Kind of ridiculous, actually. All I need is some good financial advice, to set things up so I can be secure for a while. Trouble is, I

don't know anything about handling finances. I don't even know who to get advice from."

Darcy had the same problem. Her past fiscal affairs had been operated on one basic principle: Make sure you can always borrow enough to pay off what you've already borrowed, and sooner or later things will either sort themselves out or you'll be dead before you have to settle. She had no debts now, having paid all her creditors, and no idea of how to handle her assets.

Jane sipped some more champagne, then leaned forward. "I heard," she said softly, "that Desirée Thorne still hasn't sold any alternate rights. Has your agent said anything to you about that?"

"Leonard doesn't discuss clients with other clients," Darcy said, but she wondered about that herself. Leonard had to be disappointed. Still, even Stephen King had not managed to sell any alternate rights. A theory about the reason for that was forming in her mind. Maybe Stephen King wasn't getting any offers for alternate rights because, in every possible universe, there already *was* a Stephen King, a literary juggernaut so overwhelming that no continuum could possibly be without one of him. There were probably also countless versions of Michael Crichton, Jean M. Auel, Anne Rice, Tom Clancy, and other mainstays of the best-seller list in other parallel worlds; their editors there would have no need to buy the work of their counterparts in this universe. It was only insignificant writers such as Darcy that they would buy, writers so unimportant that they probably existed in only one continuum.

These speculations were making her feel depressed, and there was no excuse for depression now. She was falling into old habits acquired when she was poor and struggling. Leonard would tell her, as he had after selling Melanesian rights to her novel *Terror Takes No Time Out*, that even such a limited edition might increase her readership. He would tell her to be glad that she was such a big deal in at least one continuum.

And she was a big deal in Parallel Universe 3. Elysium Books was now selling foreign rights in that world to *The Silent Scribe* and *In Terms of Terror*, and their version of the Book-of-the-Month Club had bought both novels. Surely that proved that she had underestimated herself and her work, and had too readily assumed that her writing was unexceptional because publishers treated it so indifferently. She had accepted and even internalized their valuation of her work. The treatment her books were getting in another continuum only proved that her publishers in this world were wrong.

The same was true of her friends and their writing. It wasn't Jane's fault that the ingenuity and wit of her mysteries were wasted on an audience unable to appreciate the details of the plumbing trade. Arlen

might have committed *Warlords of Mimistapol* to paper, but he had also won a Golden Tome Award for his ornate and sensual *Prince of Ithlakkan* trilogy.

After all, hadn't she always told herself that it was the writing itself that counted, and not what others thought of it? Her good fortune proved that she had been right to persevere.

It was almost midnight when Darcy pulled up in front of her house; it had taken her a while to sober up after overindulging at Jane's. She locked her Mercedes, wondering if she should arrange for a chauffeur and limo the next time she visited her friend; that way, it wouldn't matter how much she drank.

Of course, it wouldn't be wise to let such vices get the better of her, now that she had so much to live for. Perhaps she should contact the Lucky Scribes, an informal network several newly affluent writers had formed to exchange ideas on how to handle the sudden wealth parallel worlds were showering upon them. The Lucky Scribes, from what she had heard, spent most of their time complaining about writer's block, which was apparently proliferating among them now that they could afford more leisure and self-indulgence, but some of them might be able to advise her on other matters.

Darcy climbed the stairs to her second-floor apartment and unlocked her door. Her lease would be up soon. She would have to decide whether to move into a luxury apartment downtown or buy a house in the country. Even if she wanted to stay here, her landlord was likely to raise her rent as much as possible to take advantage of her recent prosperity, while the jokes her neighbors made about hitting her up for loans were beginning to sound both more insistent and more resentful.

The light on her phone's answering machine was blinking. Darcy hit the message button and sat down to listen.

"Darcy, this is Leonard," the machine said. "It's about four o'clock. I just got off the phone with Gertrude Banner, your Elysium House editor. Yeah, you heard that right. She called me up, I actually heard her voice. Looks like communications from other universes are leaking into the phone lines now. Anyway, she wants to talk to you. Call me tomorrow, soon as you can."

"She wants to talk to me?" Darcy said to her agent the next morning. "About what?"

"About your next book. I managed to drop a few hints about your *Terror Is My Middle Name* proposal, and she thinks it sounds great, but she wants to talk to you. She's really insistent—called back just a few minutes ago to ask if I'd heard from you yet."

Leonard had talked to her Elysium House editor twice! Amazing, Darcy thought. If telephone conversations were possible now, what next? Faxes from other worlds? Maybe a book tour, if someone could figure out how to move bodies, and not just information, from one continuum to another. Anything might be possible. She might actually decide to settle down in Parallel World 3 permanently; writers, after all, had often been expatriates.

"I guess I should talk to her," Darcy murmured. "How did she sound?"

"Like she grew up in Brooklyn and didn't quite manage to get rid of her accent. Anyway, I was sure you'd appreciate a chance to schmooze, so I told her you'd be looking forward to her call. She said she'd call sometime this afternoon, probably around three."

"My God."

"And she was making a few noises about doing a short story collection of yours."

A short story collection! Would wonders never cease? At this rate, Gertrude Banner would soon be expressing interest in her memoirs. Darcy had begun an autobiography some months back, abandoning the project after realizing that people uninterested in her fiction probably wouldn't be any more interested in her life.

"Anyway, let me know how it goes," Leonard continued. "Frankly, I think the sky's the limit at this point."

Toward three, Darcy was growing increasingly more agitated. She had spoken to plenty of editors in her life, but they had usually been people who regarded her novels largely as a relatively inexpensive way to fill slots on their lists. The only times they called were to ask her when her next novel would be finished. "You have to keep up your shelf presence! Don't leave me with empty rack space to fill!" She had always sensed such unspoken thoughts behind any offhand praise the editors might offer for her books. She had never spoken to anyone who wanted to invest big bucks in her work, or who treated her as much more than a temp who would eventually be replaced, or as a migrant worker who could be run off the farm.

Maybe, she thought as she fluttered around the phone, Gertrude Banner wouldn't call today. Darcy had known more than a few editors who seemed to assume that two months was an appropriate waiting period before returning one of her calls.

But the phone rang promptly at three. Editors in alternate worlds apparently called when they said they would.

"Hello?" Darcy said, realizing too late that her nervousness made her sound like Rocky the Squirrel.

"Darcy Langton?" a woman's voice with a touch of Brooklyn said.

That had to be Gertrude Banner, and she did sound a little like the female New Yorker Mike Myers played in drag in his "Coffee Talk" routine on *Saturday Night Live*.

"Speaking," Darcy said, dropping her voice into the Mary Tyler Moore range.

"I'm *delighted* to hear you at last," the woman said enthusiastically. "This is Gertrude Banner, your editor at Elysium House. I just finished reading *Terror Takes No Time Out*—I simply can't remember when I've had such a good time. What a terrific read—I couldn't put it down." Darcy did not have the heart to interrupt as Gertrude went on about how suspenseful and brilliantly written her novel was. "I want to buy it, of course," Gertrude finished.

"Uh, you'll have to talk to my agent about the contract."

"Well, of course. But the main reason I called is that I hear you're working on a new book. I think Leonard mentioned the title—"

"*Terror Is My Middle Name*," Darcy said.

"That's the one."

"Leonard can E-mail the proposal to you," Darcy said. "That's probably the easiest . . ."

"Oh, Darcy. I don't need to see a proposal from *you*. Just tell me you'll do *Terror Is My Middle Name* for me, and I'll start discussing the advance and contract with your agent right away."

Darcy could not bring herself to speak. "Um," she said at last.

"I'm so *pleased*. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to working with you on that. This is really going to be exciting. I know you'll need more for this one than we gave you for *In Terms of Terror*, but I just know Leonard and I can come to an agreement that will make us all happy."

"Um," Darcy said again.

"Wonderful! I'm just so excited!"

Gertrude went on to mention another pending book club deal and the prospect of interviews now that *The Silent Shriek* looked like a sure bet for the bestseller lists. It was a pity Darcy couldn't be there in person, but at least now she could be interviewed over the phone. Too bad also that there was no way to send author's copies from one continuum to another. But Gertrude could download some material from a CD-ROM that would give Darcy an idea of how the book would look, and she could rest assured that one of the best designers in the business had done her dust jacket.

"And I insisted on full cloth for the book," Gertrude went on, "a nice red shade, with Gothic gold lettering on the spine—and acid-free paper, of course. But we'll also be doing a special collectors' edition of one thousand copies in leather."

"Um," Darcy said. There wasn't much more to say. All in all, even though the conversation was basically one-sided, it was by far the best discussion with an editor she had ever experienced.

"I ran into Edwina Maris this morning," Jane murmured to Darcy as she sat down. They were sitting in Phil Donahue's green room, waiting to go on his show. Three other writers were already out in the studio fielding questions from the audience about their alternate rights deals, but Darcy had been told she and Jane would be going on after the break.

"What about Edwina?" Darcy asked.

"Oh, she was being really bitchy. I think her new book just got remaindered."

"But it only came out five months ago."

"Well, you know how it is," Jane said. "Anyway, that's not the point. She just saw a really shitty review of *The Wrench Tightens* in *Kirkus*, and made a point of telling me all about it. She looked absolutely delighted."

"What do you care?" Darcy said. "You only got about a million dollars so far for *The Wrench Tightens* in Alternate World 6."

"Yeah, I know. I shouldn't care, but I do. I'm stuck in this universe, Darcy, and here I'm just a midlist paperback mystery writer. Maybe I'm even flattering myself by saying I'm midlist. I mean, I have to live here. I'm only on the bestseller lists in a world I can't even get to."

Jane sounded totally bummed. Darcy hated to admit it even to herself, but she was feeling the same way lately. She had thought it might be her usual depression after finishing a book, but there was more to her low spirits than that. She had completed *Terror Is My Middle Name* a week ago, in record time, buoyed by Gertrude Banner's encouragement and praise and Elysium House's million-dollar advance. *Terror Is My Middle Name* was her best novel so far, but Leonard had not yet found a publisher for the book here. *The Silent Shriek* was still number one on Alternate World 3's bestseller lists, but it remained out of print in this world. Darcy might have finally made it to Phil Donahue's show, but only as part of a program about this alternate rights business. To most people, she and her colleagues were probably even less interesting than a random selection of lottery winners; a glance at the green room's monitor told her that Phil's audience was already getting bored. David Letterman had booked a few alternate rights millionaires as guests on his show, but only to poke fun at them. Oprah hadn't invited any such writers at all.

And now she, her friend Jane, and others like them had to suffer the scorn of writers such as Edwina Maris. Edwina was one of those critically acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful writers, with a small but

vociferous cult following that was waiting for her to “break out.” Along with many such writers, Edwina shared a biting wit, a gift for sarcasm and irony, and scorn for writers who appealed to the lowest common denominator. Once Edwina had directed her barbs at the denizens of bestseller lists. Now, she and her underappreciated colleagues had new targets—the merely adequate wordsmiths who appealed to mass audiences only in other universes.

Darcy knew how Edwina felt. From Edwina’s point of view, her own failure to sell alternate rights was simply further proof of her work’s worth, since those writers signing such contracts were, to Edwina, only hacks unable to achieve success in their own world. Darcy sighed. In Edwina’s shoes, she might have felt exactly the same way.

“Better crank up my hair.” Jane poked at her permed, highlighted, and stylishly cut blonde locks with a gold pick. “We have to go on after this ad.”

After their appearance, Jane went off to comfort herself with some shopping. Darcy took her limo back to the Royalton, where she had promised to meet her agent for drinks. She and Jane hadn’t exactly lighted a fire under Phil Donahue’s audience. Phil himself had grown increasingly manic in his efforts to work the crowd, and had spent the last five minutes of the program delivering a monologue about his own failure to sell alternate rights to his autobiography.

Leonard was pacing in the hotel lobby. He came toward her as soon as she was through the door. “Come on,” he said. “We’re going to Mary Thalberg’s.”

“What for?”

“Don’t ask.” He herded her back outside. “This is disaster. This is absolute, total disaster.”

“Let me guess,” Darcy said. “Money from Elysium House isn’t legal tender any more. The IRS just reversed its ruling, right? That’s why you’re here. You came to tell me I’m broke. I always knew it was too good to be true.”

“No, no. You’re still loaded. But there’s some heavy-duty shit coming down the pike anyway.” He pushed her toward the limo.

Leonard was silent all the way to Mary Thalberg’s offices on the East Side. Mary’s partner and assistants had gone home by the time they arrived, but the agent was still in her office. A computer was in one corner; a widescreen TV, complete with speakers and VCR, sat against one wall. Mary’s high heels sank into her pile carpeting as she paced soundlessly and took deep drags on a cigarette.

“I thought you quit smoking,” Leonard said to the other agent.

"I relapsed. I should die of lung cancer anyway now that so many of my clients got screwed." Mary waved Leonard and Darcy to her sofa. "Leonard's already seen this, but he wanted you to see it, too."

"See what?" Darcy asked.

"Didn't he tell you? My clients already know, the ones that have alternate rights deals. I informed them all immediately. Actually, they've been taking the news very well. Anyway, Leonard asked—"

"Just show her," Leonard said glumly.

"I was on the phone," Mary said, "talking to an editor in Parallel World 7. Had the TV on to tape *Days of Our Lives*, so I have something to watch when people put me on hold, you know? While I was talking, I lost the picture, and—well, this is what my VCR taped instead."

Mary pointed a remote at the TV. An image came on, slightly blurred and without sound, but Darcy could make out the tiny form of a young man sitting behind a large mahogany desk, apparently talking to someone on the phone. The room dwarfed him; the place was the size of Madison Square Garden, and the walls were lined with paintings that looked to her untrained eye like Botticellis. An older man was walking toward the desk, bearing a china teapot and cups on a silver tray. Darcy couldn't be sure, but thought she glimpsed a swimming pool through the glass doors behind the young man.

"That's the guy I was talking to today," Mary said. "Lorne Efferman, an editor at Cotter and Crowe—that's a publisher in Parallel World 7." She paused. "We were in the middle of our conversation when I saw that on the TV. I immediately guessed it was Lorne, and he reluctantly confirmed it. Seems some signals from other universes are leaking in over the cable." The image flickered out; Mary turned off the TV. "Let me be more specific. Lorne Efferman is an assistant editor at Cotter and Crowe."

"An assistant editor," Leonard mumbled. "Not an executive editor, or a senior editor, or even just a plain editor. An *assistant* editor. Makes you wonder what the goddamn publisher's office looks like—probably Versailles."

"My God," Darcy whispered.

"I was seeing if Lorne might be interested in some novels by one of my clients," Mary said. "I'd already sold alternate rights to them in Parallel World 8, but I thought I'd feel Lorne out. We've been waiting for alternate publishers to come to us, but I figured it was time to be a little more aggressive."

"And?" Darcy asked.

"Lorne explained—very nicely, not that it helped—that I didn't have those rights to offer him. 'Look at your contracts,' he told me, so I did. I never signed those contracts, I'm positive of that, but my name was on

them, and every contract had the same damned clause. I know it wasn't in any of my alternate rights contracts before—I'd never have approved any of them if it were. But it's there now, and I have no way to prove that I didn't let that clause go through!" Mary put out her cigarette and lit another.

"What clause?" Darcy asked.

"The clause that says we haven't been selling to just one universe when we sign those contracts. We've been giving one publisher in that particular universe rights to sell any book we give them to every other universe. And we don't get one extra fucking cent!"

"Let me put it this way," Leonard muttered from the other end of the sofa. "Seems the contracts go into uncertainty and then don't match the worlds they were written in. They drift. You end up with a different contract from the one you started with." He chuckled mirthlessly. "A lot of you writers would say that's nothing new."

"But I get royalties," Darcy said, "don't I?"

"That's just on sales in Parallel World 3," Leonard replied. "I checked your contracts. You get your share of book club money and foreign sales and everything else, but only from sales in that universe. They get to keep everything else. That's probably how they can pay such nice advances to everybody." He glared at the blank TV screen. "That's how some dipshit little assistant editor can have an office big enough to hold the goddamn Frankfurt Book Fair in."

"But—" Darcy began.

"I put in a call to that physicist Sterling Blake," Mary said. "Our agents' association put him on retainer a while back. He said something about uncertainty creeping into our continuum, about the wave functions of perception shifting or whatever. I think it means we're in a different universe from the one we were in a few days ago." She let out her breath. "Blake has some new equations to play with now, so of course he's just thrilled to death."

They were all silent for a long time. At last Darcy said, "Does it really matter? Elysium House paid me some serious money. They did beautiful editions, even if I can't get any author's copies. I could retire and never have to worry about money again, and you and the other agents are raking in plenty from the deals anyway."

"That isn't the point," Leonard said.

Darcy had known that even as she spoke. The agents would never forgive themselves for letting all those alternate rights slip away, however inadvertently. And she, along with her now-wealthy colleagues, would have to live with the knowledge that, even in other continua, publishers could still rip you off and not pay you what your work was really worth.

Not that this newly acquired wisdom should have come as much of a surprise to any writer.

Mary and Leonard were feeling a little better by the time Darcy left them to go back to her hotel. The two agents had to be philosophical about matters. Anyway, according to the grapevine, it looked as though this alternate rights business was heading toward a downturn of sorts. Mary hadn't heard of any new alternate rights contracts being signed for nearly a month, and a couple of agents she knew had reported that their calls were no longer going through to a couple of continua. Time to collect as much as they could for their clients just in case things got even more uncertain and they ended up cut off from other parallel worlds altogether. They probably wouldn't be able to sue for any uncollected payments later on unless attorneys in this universe got even more ingenious than they already were.

Darcy was set. She had to look at it that way. If Donahue's audience had been more interested in whether she knew Stephen King or in how she was going to spend her money than in her books, she could live with that. Edwina Maris might get better reviews, but raves on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* hadn't noticeably fattened Edwina's bank account. If Elysium House was ripping Darcy off, then at least there would still be all those millions of readers in Gertrude Banner's world reading *In Terms of Terror* and *Terror Takes No Time Out*.

She had to think of it that way. It was the work that mattered. Her true reward was the writing itself, wasn't it? No one could deprive her of the vivid moments she spent in worlds of her own creation, or of the sense of accomplishment she felt after finishing a final draft.

But then the image of a publisher somewhere, sitting in the midst of splendor greater than that of the Hearst estate at San Simeon, came to her. The bastards of this world, and every other world, always won in the end; they didn't care about the writers they exploited. Darcy ground her teeth. She would have to get hold of the Lucky Scribes and ask them for some advice. She could feel a writer's block coming on. ♦

Natasha's Lot

Pat Troise

Pat Troise has been writing fiction for more than four years, and "Natasha's Lot" is her first sale to a professional genre publication. She has also been published as a film journalist, and says she's working on a "contemporary urban comic fantasy novel."

Pat shares her domicile with her husband and two cats. "One day I hope to have my own team of sled dogs," she tells us, "or maybe a bloodhound. So far, the cats show little interest in competitive racing, or tracking."

The last remark hints at a competitive urge that may lie within Pat herself—and which is manifested even more strongly in the protagonist of the story you're about to read.

April 14th

Nicholas Prince is stealing my life. He's taking the things that happen to me and turning them into his stories. You probably know who Nicholas is. He's the one who had four books on the bestseller list last spring—and a movie based on another in the theaters. Nicholas is the one they call the Shakespeare of the supernatural, the superlative horror writer. Think *The Glittering*; *Carolie*; *Animal Graveyard*. That's the guy.

The thing is that I've never told him about the things that happen to me, or anything that's very personal. Oh, he knows about the childhood stuff, the parent stuff of course. Although our names aren't the same, and we have our reasons for keeping it a secret, Nicholas Prince is my brother.

But he doesn't know about the adult me. He never even asks. He never seems to care. The few times a year we see each other, he's too busy telling me stories about him. So I don't really understand how he finds these things out. And he lives so far away—I'm in New York and

he's in Vermont, or Paris. We only see each other a few times a year. I sometimes wonder if one of my friends is a spy for Nicholas, and I look at each of them on those occasions and think, "Is it you?" But I never get a sign that even the most suspect George is my Judas. Maybe Nicholas is visiting my dreams. Or maybe he's got me under some sort of post-hypnotic suggestion that he managed to insert in my unconscious when we were just kids together. I would do anything for him then. Just anything.

When we were teenagers I ate a handful of small stones and never told, even when I thought I might die from the stomach ache they gave me. It wasn't exactly his idea. He was just feeling blue that day and I wanted to buoy his spirits. By that time, we had a ritual. Nicholas would sulk. I would try to gladden him. Eventually it would come to my saying, "Cheer up, Nicholas, somebody loves you."

"Who loves me?" he'd ask.

"I love you."

"How much?"

Then I'd have to find a way of showing it that made him smile. A gift. A performance. An adventure. The day of the pebbles, I was a big hit.

"Enough to eat stones for you," I said, scooping up a handful from the garden we were sitting in and swallowing them.

"Oh, Tash," he said with a sparky smile, "you shouldn't have."

I passed the stones over the next week in a painful bliss. For Nicholas's smile, his engagement, a conspiracy between us, I would have broken my bones and fed him the soup. He was the horned god full of boyhood's beauty, its muddy valor, its animal heart. I was just a girl, and therefore destined to be banished to a distant kingdom for which my childhood was practice and in which practice I could only hope to be considered his most loyal, capable apprentice.

I was born in love with Nicholas. And I guess I love him still.

The first time I noticed his thieving, I thought it was my imagination. One of his characters, Lacey, was folding towels in "Laundry," the title story from his first collection, and she did it just like me. I figured maybe someone else folds their towels into triangles, and he's never seen me do it—I didn't start doing it until a few years ago when I realized the points would keep spiders out of the cupboards. So I chalked it up to coincidence. The next time he did it was worse. In his story "Robin's Egg" he describes the summer I was twenty-one, a difficult year for me. I went around buying eggs in the hope I could hatch myself out of one, like a Phoenix from the flames. Trying to keep my place the proper temperature with space heaters, I accidentally burned down the apartment. The hair on my eyebrows never grew all the way back in.

Nicholas was out of the country then, living in Morocco or some other godforsaken place and working on his first book. I never told anyone what really happened and blamed the blaze on a forgotten TV dinner I had in the oven when the fire started. Then, of course, there's the obvious stuff in *Carolie* and *Loonela*. But this time he's gone too far. And he's sent me the damn thing before he publishes it, for my *opinion*. I think what he really wants is my permission, and he's not going to get it. It's my life and it's private property. Nicholas has got to stop this. I've got to stop him. Just as soon as I can figure out how.

This story, "Cannibal Love," is the best thing Nicholas's ever written. It made me laugh and cry for myself, and it somehow makes sense out of the horrible affair I had with George Anubis.

George is a semi-famous performance artist. I met him at a bar in Brooklyn when I asked this baby fat-covered hunk for a match; while he was lighting my cigarette, another guy knocked him out flat. I felt sort of responsible and when everyone else ignored us, I got the brick to his feet. A few tequilas later, I took him home. George was the unwanted member of a love triangle that included both of his roommates.

George and I spent the next six months together—I worked my usual job as a secretary for a company that made sheets, and he started to get noticed. Then he asked me to play the part of the woman in his next performance piece. I was flattered until he told me the details. It involved biting off the heads of live fish. Large fish. The character was called "the sister of a famous man." I wouldn't do it. And George left me to get back together with a woman who had been in his first performance pieces as the "Meat Bomb." He has a half-moon scar on his arm from where she bit him during a performance that celebrated eating animal flesh. George loves a good steak. One night, during one of their trysts, she tried to devour more of him than he cared to part with. He came running back to me and I had the pleasure of making him eat my goldfish before I'd let him hide in my bed. Nicholas tells the story better, but you can see the potential.

Nicholas is coming to New York on a book tour next week. We're going to have dinner someplace nice, and then I'm going to find out exactly what's going on.

April 23rd

I was early for dinner. Nicholas was too. We met outside at the valet. I in my Volkswagen, Nicholas in a discreet black Mercedes with driver. He was beautiful as ever, his long blond hair tied back in a braid, his lean face even more elegant, with the sculpture of the years. His blue eyes were slightly, erotically feminine now. But the rest of him was all

man. Nicholas is six feet tall and well muscled. He's got big bones, big feet, and large, graceful hands that could have been drawn by Da Vinci. We hugged. It felt great. I rarely feel like a little girl with the men I date—I'm attracted to small guys—but in Nicholas's arms I immediately felt like a rabbit in the arms of a tame bear. In my feminine fealty, I wondered for a moment how I could possibly ask him about the stories, or even believe they had anything to do with me.

"My publisher's idea," he said as he gestured toward the car.

"It suits you, Nicholas." I smiled up at him and he pulled me in for another hug. We walked into the restaurant that way, my rabbit feet thumping in time with my heart.

We were seated at a corner table right away. Heads turned. Very few people recognize an author or an artist. But they can feel the heat. Nicholas has been writing for over twenty years. He's got the charisma of a professional artist, and it isn't about money or success. It's about all those hours of doing the work. They change a person. People like me get to try and keep up.

Nicholas looked at me with quick, almost professional eyes.

"You look good as a redhead, Tash. Your eyes are the same color as your hair now. Like chocolate cake."

"Thanks, Nicholas. You look good as a best selling author."

We hadn't seen each other for almost a year. The last time, I met him at the airport between planes when he was going to Tahiti.

Nicholas ordered a bottle of champagne, and two others over the course of our dinner. We drank equal amounts, and I let Nicholas do most of the talking. Oh, he'd ask a question about my life. But I would turn the conversation back to him as soon as I could. And Nicholas is a terrific storyteller. Finally, over coffee and cognac, he asked me about the story.

"You haven't told me what you think of 'Cannibal Love.'"

"Well, Nicholas, now that you bring it up, I don't know what I think."

He cocked his head like a puppy on a dog-food label and waited.

"I mean, I'm very curious about the characters, and the situation, and what happens. It seemed . . . familiar to me."

"How so?" Now he looked disturbed, like he had a belly full of stones.

"Do you know George?"

"George?"

"Anubis."

"The performance artist? Sure. Well, not personally. But there was a big spread on him in *Art Forum* last year." Nicholas mimed one of George's trademark poses—a man on a cross. "You figured out that my main character was based on him, huh?"

I began to feel like Nicholas was toying with me.

"Come on, Nicholas, you must know more than what you got from that puff piece to write the story. Who told you?" I was losing control of my face. I could feel my mouth quiver, and I had to smile to keep it from continuing to twitch. I tried to make it a knowing, forgiving smile. If he just admitted his source, at least I wouldn't feel like I was going crazy.

"Told me what?"

"Told you the story you wrote. About George Anubis and me. About what happened to us."

Now Nicholas was nervous, and he tried to drink from his empty cognac glass.

"You were dating him," he said with an epiphanous sigh.

"Who told you?" I asked again.

Nicholas regarded me with a mixture of uncertainty and resignation. "Nobody."

"Come on, Nicholas, this is getting old. I really want to know. I felt betrayed in that story, you know. It's my private business, not something you made up."

"You're wrong, Tash. I did make it up. Or I thought I did. I mean, I knew about Anubis. I even met him once, years ago, at a party in Vienna. But I didn't know that you had a relationship with him—"

"*Just* like the one in the story?"

"No."

"Then why did you send it to me? Like you wanted my permission to publish it, which I don't want you to do, by the way."

"Hey, little sister, I sent it because I value your opinion."

"This is news, Nick. What else have I read before you published it? I'll tell you what else. Nada."

He wiped his hands on the tablecloth. I waited.

"Natasha, if I tell you something that sounds like one of my stories, will you believe me?"

Why not? Since his stories sound like my life. I nodded.

"Something has gone wrong with me. I guess I must have sensed you were part of it. I can't tell the difference anymore between what I overheard in the cafe and what I saw on television and what is going on in my own world. And I have no control over what ends up on the page anymore. At all. I love that story. But I didn't write it. One minute I was sitting down to work. The next minute I got up and it was much much later. And it was there. That story, it wrote itself."

He brought his enormous hands down on the table so forcefully the glasses and the bud vase shivered like they were afraid for their lives. He motioned to the waiter for two more cognacs and drank the one that came moments later all at once. I drank some of mine just to let

him know we were still friends. I might be an intellectually overqualified secretary and a fair to middling mistress who can't keep a man. I might have a lot of unfinished business and a tentative grip on reality and no focus in my life yet. Nicholas might be a star writer and a successful ladies' man and much farther on the path to the coming of the Lord than I am. But he's my brother, and I don't have to be afraid of him.

"What are you saying, Nicholas? That the story of my affair with George just came to you in a dream?"

"Not in a dream, exactly. In a fugue state. It's not the first time I wrote a story and it ended up being something I didn't know was true about someone I knew. But it used to be bits and pieces."

"My triangle towels," I said.

"Those were yours too? Well, now it's whole events. I've written two stories like yours. The other one was about an affair my lover was having behind my back. I asked her to read it and she almost fainted."

I believed him. It was the only explanation that made sense.

He regarded me carefully.

"Can you . . . make flowers wilt?"

"Of course not. Get a grip, Nicholas." I haven't been able to do that for years.

We laughed together. Then I felt less amused.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, I can't stop writing."

"Can you tell when you're catching someone's life directly in your radar?"

"No, that's the problem."

"Then you have to stop—at least stop publishing—until you can. Otherwise it's not fair to the people you're writing about."

"I can't stop, Natasha. It's what I do. And it's not so terrible, that story. I can change things about it so no one will recognize you."

"Like my hair?" The girl in his story had red hair. "It's too close. I don't want you to publish it."

"You're overreacting, Tash. Sleep on it, at least. I can make it different."

Nicholas was turning on the sulk. I could see it in the corners of his mouth and his tightly crossed arms.

"You know, Nicholas, I thought you sent me the story knowing it was all true. I guess I'm glad you didn't do it on purpose. But I still don't want you to publish it. I'm sorry."

"I am too, Natasha. Because I can't do what you want. I can't control where my ideas come from or where they go. And I've already sold the story. It's going to be on the newsstands in a week."

I was furious. "Where?"

"*Esquire*."

Now it was my turn to make the tableware quiver.

"This is the last time, Nicholas. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm off limits to your writing from now on."

"How am I supposed to know? I can't run everything by you. And really, Tasha, who's going to know? You don't have a public reputation to ruin. Nobody even knows about us." He sat back and crossed his arms. "I can't promise you anything. It's different for me. I'm an artist." Nicholas has said this to me all our lives.

"You'd better find a way to know." I couldn't believe how angry I was. But I felt painted into a corner, and didn't know what else to say. After we both stared at the tablecloth for a minute, the waiter mercifully came with Nicholas's credit-card receipt, he signed, and we busied ourselves with leaving the restaurant.

Outside, I felt too drunk to drive. Nicholas could see it, and offered to drop me off. In the car, we sat side by side like a pair of wooden puppets. I looked out the window but didn't really see a thing. I realized for the first time in my life that although I loved my brother, I was so jealous of him I could feel it in the roots of my hair and in the soft spots where my fingernails grew. He was the artist. I was the everything else. And because he had written about me, I felt violated. I wanted some sort of payback. And although I felt not altogether pure in my desire, there was no holding back the feeling. When the car pulled up in front of my apartment, Nicholas walked me to my front door.

"I love you," I told him. He was larger than life, and still held the mystery of the other for me, even in my anger.

"You wouldn't if I didn't write." He kissed me on the top of the head. It felt hot where his lips touched. I watched him walk to the car and saw the driver open the door for him. It made me sick.

April 25th

I called George. We're sort of back together now and he owed me a favor for sparing him the little plastic Diver Dan the night he ate my fish. He always used to brag about buying spells that really worked from his landlady. He says it's how he got semi-famous. He rents the top of a town house in the Village from her. I told him I needed to put a spell on someone.

"Oh yeah, what? A love spell?"

"None of your business. I just want to meet her, and find out what she charges."

"Lizzie's great. She charges what she feels like. Sometimes errands. Sometimes things. Sometimes money. She made me give her all my polka-dot jelly jars the last time I went to her."

"Fine. Let's do it."

As soon as Lizzie opened the door, I knew I would never tell her the whole truth. She was a dark little tomato of a woman in her thirties who was obsessed with cowboy paraphernalia, judging from the rodeo pennants and horsehead lamps and the Roy Rogers mugs we were drinking out of. It was catnip tea, she said. The place stank of fennel and garlic. Lizzie and George were too eager to gossip about everyone they knew, including their mailman, who was having potency problems. If she talked about old Mike, I knew she'd talk about me. I declined a palm reading. I knew she'd see more than I wanted her to. George, as soon as he knew I was uncomfortable, got up and left me alone with her to find my own way out of the situation.

"So, can I help you?" She was taking notes on the back of a paper bag.

"Well, I've got a friend who has a problem."

"It's easier to work with the client than for someone else. Can he come in himself?"

As the conversation progressed, the exchange between us became quicker and quicker.

"No." I tried to sound regretful and concerned. "He's—he doesn't know he has this problem."

Lizzie was impatient for the good stuff. "What *is* the problem?"

"He's bothered by all sorts of . . . observations, I guess. It's like the Peeping Tom part of him is out of control, and he can't turn it off. And he's exhausted from all the stuff he's, well, watching. He needs a rest."

"You mean he's a voyeur? Or a busybody?"

I felt us change gears as our voices pitched higher.

"Exactly."

"Which exactly?"

"Half and half. Of each. I mean, he's a snoop. Who doesn't mind his own business. And he's sort of psychic, I think. A psychic snoop."

Lizzie smiled like the pet crocodile of the Fates. She seemed unaffected by the gallop of our pace.

"And you want to turn off his . . . surveillance devices?"

This was sounding more ominous than I'd intended. If you could sound ominous while talking at ninety miles an hour.

"Not to hurt him. Just to get him centered back in his own life."

"And keep him from knowing what's going on in yours?"

My enthusiastic little head was whipping agreement like a terrier's tail.

"Well, no. Not just mine. I think it would help him to make it general. For a while?"

"Okay." Lizzie got up and marched herself into the other room where

I heard a variety of noises—tinks, thuds, and a rather mechanical croak. I expected to see something bizarre when I peered in after her. But she'd been making herself a peanut butter sandwich on Wonder Bread.

"I forgot to eat lunch. I was starving. I'll make up a spell for you to do and send it to you in the mail tomorrow. It's the way I work."

"You don't do it? Yourself, I mean."

"Uh-uh. It's your business. I'm just supplying information."

"Will I have to do anything really weird?"

Lizzie cocked an eyebrow.

"Hey, you lived with Georgie Porgie for six months. What's really weird? Nah, it'll be easy to do with what you've got around the house and maybe a trip to the supermarket."

"What do I owe you?" I fumbled in my pockets for cash.

She walked outside onto the street with a last bite of sandwich in hand. I followed her. Brushing crumbs from her cleavage, she said to her breasts, "Oh, how about those?" and pointed downward.

I regarded my feet, and the lovely black cowboy boots with the red roses on the toes. I'd had them for years. It figured. I sat on her stoop and dutifully peeled them off, recovering my poor grey socks from the insides and pulling them onto my lonely feet for some minor comfort. She sat down next to me, kicked off her sneakers, and pulled on the boots.

"A perfect fit!" she announced. That also figured.

"Well," I said, getting up, "thanks."

"Sure thing. Let me know how it works."

"I will."

I got into my car, which she'd let me park in her driveway, and I turned over the engine. Just before I drove away, Lizzie leaned in on me and I heard her neck crack, one vertebra at a time. I could smell the fennel and the catnip and the garlic on her breath. Only the glass window, rolled half down, kept her breasts back.

"What does Mr. Nosy do for a living?"

"He lays bricks."

She smiled again and backed up so I could take off, and when I looked back in my rear-view mirror, she did a little hop, skip, and jump in my boots up the stairs to George's place, where he opened the door before her hand touched the knocker.

May 5th

I got a letter from Lizzie in the mail yesterday, a short note written on a piece of stationery that had cowgirls on the border. A crumpled paper doll fell from the folded sheet when I opened it. It looked like a pattern for a gingerbread man. The note read:

Dear Natasha,

Get an old piece of clothing from the petitioner. Use the enclosed pattern to make a doll out of the fabric. Stuff it with basil, bay leaves, and some cloves. If you have a walnut, throw that in for the heart. Name the doll after your friend. Get a piece of ribbon long enough to wrap around the doll—blue would be a good color. Get some anise seeds and make a circle around yourself with them—this is to keep your power in and other things out. Work inside the circle. Don't go outside of it until you're done.

Wrap the ribbon around the doll and say: "This doll is my friend, whatshisname. What I do to it is done to him. Now he is bound in peace, it surrounds him like a shawl of grace. His eyes, his ears, all his senses ordinary and extraordinary are closed to outside forces that would disturb him. Impressions and intuitions no longer interfere with his rest. Only good deeds and positive energy will be allowed past this protective barrier." If you don't like these words, use words of your own.

When you're done wrapping the doll, tie as many knots as you feel you want to in the ends and visualize the end result as you tie each knot. If you can get your friend to do this with you, it will help. Once the doll is wrapped and tied, you can leave the circle. Put it in a safe place. When the spell has done its work and you no longer need it, unknot the doll, pick the pieces apart, and bury them. Good luck.

P. S. Don't get too hung up on the form—your intentions are the real magic. L.

I had an old shirt of Nicholas's in the closet, but it was one of my favorites, a long butter-colored flannel job. I didn't want to give it up totally, so I just cut out the two doll patterns from the tail and kept it. The rest of the stuff was relatively easy. Except when I forgot about leaving the circle to answer the phone. It was George. He wanted to borrow a sleeping bag for some trip to the country. I wouldn't trust him on a dare with mine. When I was done, I took the doll and put it inside my favorite feather pillow. Oh, and I changed the words. Just a little.

May 10th

I've been reborn after all. George somehow convinced me to go camping with him, and we were hiking along some trail behind this art school when I saw a group of people in a landscape painting class, and felt an overwhelming urge to join them. I tried to talk the teacher into letting me borrow some supplies, but he wouldn't do it. Said the others had paid for the privilege. I stole one of his brushes—a big sable one,

and George dragged me away. He said I was being obnoxious. When we got back to camp, I made a pretty little design out of rocks around the campfire, and he got aggravated when I kept playing with them. I let the hot dogs burn because I thought they'd be more interesting to eat that way. George didn't appreciate the experiment. What really ruined the trip for me, though, was that George, a bona fide sex addict, said he didn't want to do it all night just because *I* was in the mood. He dragged me home the next morning, complaining the whole time that I was trying his patience. He didn't even like the way I was looking at him. I never noticed before, but he's got little hairs growing out of his ears. And his lips are crooked. One side turns down just a little. And he's got this nervous habit of pulling the hairs on his chest. And he laughs like a donkey. A genuine hee-haw. And the car smells from a combination of unwashed George and burning engine parts. I don't know what made me share these observations, except George has made enough of them about me. But he only got more and more annoyed. By the time he dropped me off, he wouldn't even speak to me. I took his map of Connecticut. It had an interesting pattern of dirty footprints on the cover from sitting on the floor by the passenger seat. I've decided something. If George and Nicholas can do it, so can I. I'm going to be an artist.

May 15th

I can't believe I waited so long to do this for myself. All week I've been having the *best* time working on different sorts of stuff. I've always been attracted to painting, and so I went out and bought myself a set of watercolors. I've been doing them one after the other ever since. Each one is better than the last one. And then I got some clay, and I've been making some little figures. When I sit among them after I'm done working for the evening—although I never feel completely done—I get this terrific feeling like I'm doing something right for a change. Most of the time I feel like a clumsy, silly, difficult version of a human being—something like a kite with a razor-blade tail that nobody wants to play with. But now I feel safe and sound, and totally lovable. That's probably because I'm full of love. I love the paint I get stuck under my fingernails, I cherish the clay that flakes from my hands and gets stuck in my hair, every spot that ends up on the linoleum or on the walls, every lost hour. I'm surrounded by my newly created children, contentment rules my soul. I know the stuff is good. But what if it's great?

May 25th

George the assassin came to see my babies. He trashed them. He took every one of my children and beat them to death. He told me the

ones I thought were sweet were perverted, and the ones I thought were beautiful were ugly. I was shocked at first. My funny little circus of figures didn't make him laugh. The watercolors that made me cry left him cold. Then I tried to ignore what he had to say, but he's got much more experience than I do, and I don't know, I just suddenly saw everything through his eyes, and now I know everything I've been doing is awful. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't. So I kept on at my clay figures. They got more and more abysmal every time I put another piece of clay down until they were so uselessly ugly I wouldn't use them to deep-six a dead man. I thought I'd try something else, and made myself an outfit to wear to work—slacks and a jacket and a shirt. They seemed like beautiful designs when they were in my head, but when I finished them, they were unbearably misshapen. I put them on, and decided I looked like a freshman in clown school. Then I started back in on the painting. Mud looks better than my paintings. My house is full of this stuff, and I keep going back to it and thinking that I can make it better—and then I make it worse. I stay up all hours. I can hardly sit still at work. I got yelled at for rearranging my boss's desk without asking if I could. I just thought it would look better. But neither one of us could find anything he needed all week. Also, I constantly have sex on my mind, and I'm too upset at George to call him. The only good thing that's happened to me is that when my head finally hits the pillow, I'm out.

June 3rd

Nicholas called from Vermont. Just like always, when I heard his voice, I felt a small flutter of fat, happy winged things land in my heart. I hardly said hello back before he started telling me he's got *writer's block*. He said, "I can't write anymore, Natasha. It went from out of control to a dead halt. I don't know what's wrong with me. Remember the last time I saw you? I used to go to sleep at night and I could hardly stay in bed, I had so many ideas. I'd hail a cab, and before I could bring my arm back down, another great story would come to me. People would jump out of my life and onto the page. Now I don't even have *bad* ideas. And I never see anyone anymore. They're around, but it's like they're avoiding me. Something always comes up. Or if I do see them, they're unbelievably boring. My wife and my children and my girlfriend have become the dullest people on earth. I haven't even overheard a decent conversation on the street."

I couldn't help feeling for him. He sounded so miserable, I stopped feeling sorry for myself. "Don't worry, Nicholas," I told him. "It won't last. Enjoy the break. Maybe you need one more than you realized. I mean, things were getting crazy, you know?"

"But this is worse. And the strangest thing, I get the distinct feeling

that lots of interesting stuff is going on anywhere I'm not. Like there's a party going full tilt until I knock at the door, and then everyone just vanishes."

It was weird, I was having a hard time paying attention to what Nicholas was telling me. Instead, I kept hearing his breath in between the words. And I wanted to feel it going in and out of my lungs.

"I have an idea. Why don't you come for a visit? Stay with me. We'll do stuff together. And I've got a surprise for you."

"Hallelujah, a surprise. When should I come?"

We set a date. He'll be here Friday. I can give him back what he lost, at least I can do that. First I'll listen to his troubles and take him to the park for long afternoon walks. I'll bring him to my favorite places for coffee and for books. Then I'll unwrap the doll and undo the spell.

June 7th

Nicholas arrived last night like a regular person; he even took a cab from the airport. When I opened the door to let him in, my first impression was of a root vegetable. He was pale as a turnip and must have lost fifteen pounds; even his T-shirt and jeans looked washed-out and dusty. If I didn't know he was my brother, I would have taken him for one of those guys who offer to wash your windows at stoplights during rush hour.

I was unhappy to see the change in him, but as soon as he saw me, he grabbed me in a bear hug, and he felt like my old Nicholas. While we embraced, I was already thinking of how I would do a life-sized sculpture of him with his suitcase—or maybe a big painting. I had this image of him as a magician unable to get his tricks out of the bag, and thought it would make a poignant painting. The thought excited me, and also made me unaccountably sad. I could never make it happen. Even with magic. I felt that way a lot now. It depressed me.

Nicholas stood in the middle of my living room, cluttered as it was with my miscreant acts, and took it all in. I didn't know I'd be so embarrassed by the stuff. I felt like he was looking into a hamper full of my dirty underwear; I knew he was shocked and dismayed by the languageless, skill-less wonders—the still-lives in oils; the half-dozen clay golems; the assemblage of trash. I was ashamed, and only my stubbornness kept me from ripping the drapes off the windows and covering the things up. Now he'd make fun of me, or humor me, or worse, tell me off for even thinking I could stray into his territory.

Nicholas walked over to the worst of the clay men and fingered the surface lightly. He grinned. How could I ever explain? How could I even imagine him posing for me? When I could work up enough spit to talk, I would apologize.

He moved from one piece to the next, stopping at what was only a collection of unread junk mail and the week's dirty teacups. I thought some small detail—a lack of grotesquerie, perhaps—would make him realize it wasn't part of my awful oeuvre. He picked up a cup and saucer from the pile and held them like a pair of St. Anthony's pigeons in his lovely large hands. Underneath was one of my lists written on the back of an envelope. He picked it up and read it out loud.

"Bomb, bomb, bomb, Tampax, Harvey's, quarters, Brillo, turpentine."

"Natasha," he said, and motioned to the paper in his hand, then around the room with a shrug. "This is truly marvelous work."

June 10th

I'm so glad Nicholas came. We've been the best thing in the world for each other. Nicholas isn't depressed anymore. And *I* cheered him up—with my art. He loves it, all of it. At first, I thought he was joking with me. But he isn't. I can see it in his eyes, a sort of greedy delight that he used to get when we were kids doing something expressly forbidden, like shaving the cats. He tells me I've got a "singular *gift* for expression," and he's been hanging on my every word. We spent the whole weekend together, and he was never bored, or restless, or anything but wonderful to me. It's funny when you think of it. Nicholas Prince is *my* number one fan. No, it's different. He's my only admirer—and the only one I care about. I just can't take the doll out of my pillow now. I changed my mind about giving it back.

June 15th

I've discovered something interesting. If you're not used to being admired all the time, it can be draining. More draining even than the act of making something out of nothing. I've been dragging myself to work and sleepwalking through the day, all the while carrying around this obsessive need to finish the portrait of Nicholas I've started. At first, I thought I could fit it on a canvas. But I kept running off the edges until I got the brilliant idea to do it as a mural. Now it's sort of a mixed-media kind of thing. I told Nicholas he couldn't look at it until it was done. But when I came home Monday night, I could see he'd been snooping. Not just at the painting, but everywhere.

"I couldn't help it, Natasha, I just feel so good when I see your stuff. Otherwise, I'm just miserable. It's the only thing that gets through to me. The only thing."

I should feel flattered, and I do, but I need some privacy. I have no idea what this picture is going to be, and I don't want to be pressured. It's bad enough that when Nicholas poses, he looks like the Pieta holding her crucified son. That's how he looks any time we're not talking or

he isn't playing with my stuff. He told me it's because he thinks his days of smoke and mirrors are over. He said he'd never write again. He wants to go back to school and learn a trade. Last evening, when we were saying our goodnights, he asked me if I still liked him now that he was completely ordinary. When he asked me, I felt lonely enough to cry. I told him he wasn't ordinary. Not my brother. Not to me. When I'm done with this piece, I'll fix him, just as soon as I'm done.

I've been staying away from George ever since he came and told me what he thought of my work, and I've been so busy with Nicholas I haven't had time to think about him. Today he called and offered to make me lunch at his place. He had on his "let's make up" voice, that one that promises great sex, and it came back to me that he had these nicest, smoothest arms, covered with just enough baby fat to make the muscles underneath soft to the touch, even when they were working their hardest. I had been moving the office furniture around with the help of the mailroom boy, and I was hot and sweaty already. So I went.

There was a girl at George's when I got there. She was just delivering a large Garden of Eden with extra cheese from George's favorite pizza place; he's gone lacto-ovo-veggie. On the way out, she kept staring at me. George and I were barely through with the small talk when the phone rang. It was the girl. He told me she thought I was somebody famous. And when she asked George who I was, his answer got me a little upset. George said, "Nobody," and hung up on her. He sat down next to me on the thrift shop couch, making these concerned cow eyes at me.

"What's the matter with you, Natasha?"

"Come on George, what sort of a question is that? I'm fine." I started unbuttoning his shirt, and my own. He let me, but didn't stop the X-ray eyes. So I stopped the unbuttoning. He put my hands back to work.

"You look like shit, Tash." My hands stopped again. "I mean, you look *good*." Now his hands began a trip down my legs. "But you look like you're burning your insides out."

"I'm changing George. You might not believe it. But I'm becoming an artist. I'm transforming, I'm evolving, I'm metamorphosing. It burns calories." I kissed him, and he pushed me back on the couch and for a while things were all right between us again.

George was walking me back to the office when I told him that I had showed my work to someone else, someone well known and accomplished, someone who thought I showed great talent. He probably meant to smile warmly, but what I saw was this curly lipped smirk, and I pinched him hard enough on the plump part of his arm to make him

yelp. All this time, we had been turning heads. I figured it was George, whose semi-fame is mostly local. But I wasn't sure. It was making me a little paranoid. So I stopped walking, and I told George that people were watching us.

He looked around at a gathering of two or three people who had stopped nearby, but they all looked away when he made eye contact.

"Natasha, It takes more than wanting something to have it. It takes time."

Why *is* that? I thought. I mean, wanting feels so strong, why doesn't the desire *make* it count? And why doesn't anyone value that? I felt undeniably fragile, and pictured George, my fellow artist now, wearing ego-stomping jackboots. I know I can be difficult. But I've also been very generous and loving with him. He'd even tell you that. And I knew the art took time. God knows I'd been spending time.

"Those people are *staring*," I repeated.

He didn't even look this time. "*No* they're *not*," he said, rubbing his arm. "You're imagining it."

By now, a half a dozen random New Yorkers were definitely watching us with raptor intensity. "Hey," a blonde housewife type called over to me, "aren't you famous? Aren't you somebody?"

"No," I shouted at her, louder than I'd intended. "But I *will* be!"

George dragged me down the street until we were doing a fair semblance of walking together. I calmed down. After all, it made sense that George might be a little jealous of me now that I was one of *them*. I told him I was just overtired, and I was sorry for behaving like a fish-wife. I promised to call him soon, and he finally left me alone. I went up to the office, made sure nobody was looking, collected a bunch of samples I'd been eying to put into my new piece, told my boss I was sick, and went home. I would finish this piece, and it would be great, and then I would show it to George and he'd be sorry he wouldn't take me seriously. I was going to take the subway home, but when I left the building, I started to get that creepy feeling that people were watching me, and so I hopped a cab. Besides, it was tough to maneuver with all those sheets under my arm.

When I got home, Nicholas was waiting. As much as I adore him, he was beginning to get on my nerves, with that anxious glance and his eager-to-pleaseness. Also, the apartment was beginning to look like God's blender. And all Nicholas seemed to do when I was gone was wallow in it. He asked me about my day, but I didn't want to talk about it. Instead, I changed into my work clothes, his yellow shirt and my Hawaiian shorts, and went to work. Nicholas dressed up in this great tuxedo I'd rented for him. He sat there looking grim and anxious and

unhappy—his knees were actually shaking, and he kept watching me with this tuned-in look of a junkie to the guy who's got the goods. I don't know how much time passed. I kept working on the assemblage, which had started to take on more and more of the appearance of a giant sewer god, and getting more and more determined, and adding more and more stuff, until I went looking for some feathers to put on top of it. I went into the bedroom and grabbed my pillow. I was in this frantic hurry, a state that kept escalating way past when I thought I couldn't get any more wired. I knew the feathers would change everything for the better, and I didn't care anymore about anything but the work. So I tore apart the pillow and left the doll on the bed, safely buried in an avalanche of feathers.

Back in the living room, Nicholas was looking up at the assemblage and weeping. "It's so beautiful," he said. "I almost can't bear it."

I wanted to be pleased by his approval, but the truth is, I was really disgusted by his behavior. It wasn't within the galaxy of normal. Even though what I'm working on *is* really good. I think.

"Please, Nick, give it a break."

Then George calls. And I hang up on him. He calls again and I do the same thing. The third time, I unplug the phone. I try to calm Nicholas down. When talking (which is hard to do while you're doing this sort of intense creating) doesn't work, I get a bottle of valium and have Nicholas take a few. Then some more time passes and there's a knock on the door. Which I ignore. Nicholas has gone groggy, and keeps falling out of position. I prop him back up and shout GO AWAY at the door.

"Natasha," comes the voice of that son of a bitch George, "open the door."

I have two choices with George. I can let him in and fight it out face to face, or I can steel myself to the fact of his knocking until the door falls down. So I open the door and he comes in—with his crocodile pal, cowgirl Lizzie. They walk into the place like storm troopers, then stop dead as statues and just look around. I'm so surprised by what they do that I stop in my own tracks to see what they're looking at. My masterpiece. I feel like I've got on a pair of trick glasses. When I'm with Nicholas, I know it's magnificent. But now, looking at it over George's shoulder, I know it's not.

I'll do my best to describe it, as long as you keep in mind the real thing was made up of the dining room chairs as an armature, stuffed with many common household items and half my wardrobe. It was topped with a month's worth of *The New York Times*, a generous supply of sheets, some of the breakfast dishes, a few gallons of glue, the feathers from my favorite pillow, and three hundred dollars in professional art supplies. These are only words:

E YOU DON'T LOVE
 hair pretty darling why di
 ITNO WAY OUT I'll nev
 ouknewhowlwishyou
 causeyouwouldn'ttreatmethis
 why wasn't iever goodenough
 blaterhowmuchsuchmansuchmanSUCHMANtoomu
 witfeelsogoodtobombBOMBunglyudontsuitcaserabbitred
 ondHAIRellowINTHEMUCHILOVEWHYnotmewhynotmepret
 tyboyprettyo solovelyibrothersisterand so on so
 antitwantl NTITWANTITnowlonelywholo
 oyouLOV eNOW I wishyou wereI can
 y, alwayslovedyousomuchI'llshowthemallshow
 atter?I'd doit if no that doesn'tworkit'stoodarkhe's
 atterinthened?doingthis?Ican'tdothis,I mustbecrazyeve
 HATDOTHEYKNOWyellowcowyoudeserveabreaktoday
 syesitsworkingnownoitsnotyoul lefoolwhy can'tIwhereis it?
 ustknewOh I like that, t s good. More of that s
 esmenothelovesmehelo notwhateveryouwantIca
 eryouwantIcanbecanbecan ardbabyitsnoteasyitshardb
 thelittleredroostertoolazytocr aycanyoucanyoudoitlikeIca
 muchfunsoonCOMEssoonCOME olaswhat'shappeningtous?
 don'tknowcanIcomeinnowplea egoodarfarfarfarfHeyyout
 OUWITH*whatdo you want me to d* at do you want. Can
 THEstarsINYyourEYESseemeyet?

Nicholas takes this opportunity to wander off in a stupor toward the bedroom, since there really isn't anywhere to lie down in the living room, and I try to grab him by the tail of his tux, but before I can, George grabs me by the gingerbread boy cut-outs in Nicholas's yellow shirt, and says in his best daddy voice, "Jesus Christ, Natasha, what the fuck is going on?"

I would murder George if I had a decent weapon at hand, but I'm full of glue and feathers myself. Lizzie has followed Nicholas into the bedroom. I can hear him wailing, and when I tear loose from George, I know Nicholas can feel the doll nearby, like you can feel your soul when it starts to float away in the night and you jerk awake to bring it back. He's jerking around like a guy who's trying to find his lost eyes with every other sense he's got but sight.

I get it now. Nicholas loves the things I made because I made them with his eyes; I've tried to steal his life like he stole mine, but all I got was his creativity. And, like a well-trained horse with a novice rider on its back, it won't work right for me. That's why I've been making monsters. All I wanted was to change the balance of power between us for once in our lives; be the one who was loved more than she loved. I was so tired of being Nicholas's cheering section. I was tired of trying so hard to please him and George and everyone else I truly admired. But this is clearly not the way to work it. The jig is up. And I'm glad.

I don't *enjoy* this artist thing. It's like being in the part of the hurricane where everything is twirling and you can't get comfortable and you think you're crazy but there's no one you trust to tell you the truth and everyone else seems so far away, down on the ground where the hurricane isn't blowing, and you're lonely and all you've got for company is whatever else the hurricane has sucked up in its mindless greed and being noticed gives me the creeps, and I miss my brother the way he was and I hate his fawning and I'm tired and I want my little feather pillow back so that I can sleep for long enough to forget this ever happened.

I run into the bedroom and pull the little doll out of its feathery grave and give it to Nicholas, despite his tentative hold on consciousness. As soon as he holds it, he gets a jolt of something, and Lizzie holds George back from interfering.

"Go ahead," I say to Nicholas, "untie the knots and unwrap it." I pull a pair of scissors from a drawer and wait. Nicholas's big fingers seem to have been made for these knots. He unties them with Eagle Scout finesse. Inside is the little yellow doll, whose presence makes me unaccountably tender. Nicholas looks at me and grins this goofy grin. I take the doll from his hands and unstitch the edges and then pull the little walnut heart out and hand it back to my brother.

"You might want to eat it," says Lizzie.

Nicholas is staring at her and then me and then George like we're not from around here.

"This is *very* interesting," he says of the nut in his hand, "this is all very interesting," and then Nicholas cracks the big nut in his palm and eats the meat. That's when I feel this great calm like hot milk in my blood, and the colors stop jumping and the noise, I had no idea I was hearing so much noise, fades to quiet, and I can hear George breathing and he smells good again, and I even feel like giving *him* a hug, and I look at Nicholas and he's beautiful again, like a an angel or a movie star or something, and I notice Lizzie is giving Nicholas this look like it's love at first sight, and I know my old Nicholas is back.

October 8th

I quit my job at the sheet factory where they were beginning to give me the eagle eye, and gave up my place to see the world. I'm starting with Alaska. You can have the life of the mind. I thought I might like to become a dogsled racer. I told George he could try and find me. Nicholas has gone back to his regular life of brilliant writing and high living, except that he says he's going to visit New York more often now that he's met the lizard cowgirl. Before he left, he helped me put the apartment back in shape, and although we took the art apart, he saved one of my little clay figures. "I really like it," he told me. He actually seemed interested in my telling the truth about everything I'd been feeling and doing since this all started. He was mad for a while, but too interested in what I did to write me off, no pun intended. I told him he could even write a story about it, as long as he changed enough of the details so no one would know who it *really* was about. "No problema," said my brother. "I'm back in the saddle again." Which reminds me, I want my boots back. ♦

Party Favors

Alex Nathan Shumate

"I've been writing for the past ten years in one- and two-year spurts," says Nathan, who doesn't go on to specify how many of those spurts he's been through so far. He's currently focusing a lot of energy on breaking into comics as a writer and illustrator, but is also turning out prose fiction. His latest spurt of writing activity produced the wry, almost acerbic tale that starts below, and which uses as its centerpiece a type of character that seems to show up at every party we've ever been to.

IVa

I caught a pod to Lowtown that night and lingered in the space between two crumbling buildings, just outside the wire mesh fence surrounding the platform. I was wearing my dark uni-mold again, and a black body sheet; though I wasn't dressed very Lowtown, I expected to be unnoticed, and therefore stay out of trouble.

Distant sounds reached me—barking or shouting, I couldn't tell. The air was caustic and almost visible with smoke and rot. I hung back in the shadows of the alley, trying not to breathe too deeply. The wildlife was loud, but not immediate; the tamer Lowtowners were presumably trying to bed down for the night, and the wilder ones didn't like the lights around the platform.

I listened absently as I waited.

I

At the party on Broxton I had immediately been roped into earnest and trivial small talk by Allysia. She had recently had her ear redone; it was a graceful scallop-shell laid back against the side of her head, with ribs

of reinforced ceramic and a lattice of gold thread connecting them like a spider's web. For all of her Edge affectations, Allysia was the ultimate bore, like a relic of old California that hadn't followed it into the Pacific.

"But, really, how *could* they?" she was burbling, swinging her arms for expression as if she had forgotten the drink in her hand. "I'll allow, the Consortium has its problems, but for *anyone* to just up and secede, well . . ." She trailed away in a titter that she probably thought sounded superior; I heh-heh-hehed out of politeness and looked for somewhere to go.

Ronald, the host, sauntered by from the conversation he had just left, looking like he was open for another one. I flicked my eyes toward the door; Allysia automatically turned to see who was coming in (very nearly spilling her drink), and I scuttled off to Ronald's side.

"Ah, Hale," said he, as he saw whom I was scuttling from. She had turned back, seen I wasn't there, and immediately inserted herself into a nearby three-way conversation already in progress. "I see you've escaped her clutches."

"Just barely. Throb?"

"Let's."

We made our way through the clots of tittering, dancing, arguing people. As we skirted between hundreds of bodies to the throb table in the middle of the atrium, I watched the great kaleidoscope of the rich and Edge as they separated and rejoined into their many overlapping mini-cliques.

"Ah," Ronald said by way of announcement as we reached the table. I picked up a capsule and pressed it against my wrist, felt the slight pop, and then leaned against the table as full synesthesia gripped me for a split second in which I could smell the pink light streaming through my head. Everything smelled, tasted, felt, sounded pink. My heartbeat looped back through my ears, reverberating in my sinuses.

I opened my eyes, not remembering that I'd closed them, and saw the familiar pink border around my vision. The rhythm in my head toned down enough that I could hear the party sounds around me again. The music was throb also, with full subsonics thrumming along with the tone in my head. I dropped the empty capsule into a dish with several others.

Ronald still had his eyes closed; the vein in his temple was pulsing to the throb. He was a small, round man; his face was getting that smooth look, like melted wax, from too many facelifts. There was a thin tattooed line down the straight of his nose. He was wearing a white ruffled shirt of flowered lace, and black net pants through which his red bikini briefs showed clearly (which was apparently the point).

He opened his eyes, sighed, and looked around. He nodded to me. I

nodded back. He looked at Allysia, who was alighting on group after group like a swallow, slowly making her way to the throb table. Fine strands of gold extended back over the edge of her redone ear and trailed after her. Her titter wafted across the room to us, even over the music in the air and in our veins.

"Honestly," said Ronald slowly, trying to hold his words together, "honestly, I don't know why we keep inviting her."

"Who's we?" I asked. "I thought you ran these parties."

"You know." He flopped a hand all-inclusively at everyone around. "We." He shook his head in dismay and scratched his groin through his pants. "She tries her hardest to be Edge, but it's all rancid. Did you know"—and here his voice took on a conspiratorial tone—"that her father actually worked for a living? I mean, with his hands!"

"So do I, after a fashion."

He jumped a bit at that, then shook his head. "You're different, Hale. You perform services invaluable to the community. You're not Edge either, but at least you don't try to be something you're not. I mean, look at how you're dressed."

It was true. I was wearing a cool gray uni-molded second skin, so dark it was almost black, that covered everything south of my neck in one seamless piece. Very modern, and marginally trendy, perhaps, but hardly Edge.

"Do you resent it?" I asked.

"Not at all. Like I said, you're a valuable member of the community. You're like a rock, in counterpoint to all of these silly flowers growing around you." Again he gestured expansively.

"How artistic," said I.

Allysia's daughter Heaven came by and swooped up a capsule. She throbbed quicker than anyone else I'd ever seen; within ten seconds she had fired it into her bloodstream, arched her back, opened her eyes dreamily, and pitched the empty capsule over my head into the dish.

"Ronald. Great party, as usual," she said with only the faintest trace of slur. Her eyes were half-shut, giving her a very seductive air. She was fashionably bald, with a two-inch sash of red silk looped across the top of her head and over her ears, tied under her chin.

"And hel-lo to you, Hale," she said as she traced her finger from my collarbone down the length of my front. Then she went back to the party, moving between people so gracefully she looked like she was swimming.

"Don't bother," said Ronald, guessing my train of thought. "You may be a respected member of the community, but you'd have to be a lot more Edge to have any chance with her."

I sighed and leaned back against the table.

"Aha!" Hands dropped on our shoulders from behind, and we turned to see Allysia, reaching over the table to us. She smirked at her own mischievousness.

"I can see what's on your mind, Hale!" she announced, with a wink. "She's a fine bit of flesh, isn't she? Only the finest sperm went into her to begin with—and it's been that way ever since, I gather! If I was a man, I'd be wanting to slip it to her myself!"

She twirled off with a younger man in tow on her arm, and Ronald turned to me. "I don't suppose . . . that you'd do me a favor? Encourage her not to come, for the good of the party?"

"How do you mean, 'favor'?"

He spread his hands. "Hale, Hale, are you really that selfish that you'd turn something like this—something you'd benefit from, too—into *business*?"

"Like I said, I work with my hands to earn a living—and without money, those hands are tied."

Ronald looked over his shoulder to where Allysia had found someone new to bore. "I suppose, with enough people here, I don't have to put up with her very much—and there's always throb, to take the edge off her . . ." His voice trailed off dejectedly as he walked away.

I remained, enjoying the throbbing music in my skull, starting to feel the dryness in my throat that always follows throb.

IVb

A screaming woman ran down my alley with blood dripping down her face and shreds of torn clothing trailing behind her. She was limping, and the three twelve-year-olds chasing her were gaining. I pushed back into the shadow of a boarded-up doorway in the wall behind me as they hooted and hollered by, mixing war-cries with descriptions of what they would do to her when they caught her, brandishing their broken-glass knives and kicking up the caked trash on the ground.

I hoped they wouldn't catch her—at least, not until she had rounded a corner, out of my vision.

A sparse rain started throwing heavy drops. I pulled up the hood of my body sheet to protect myself and pulled my arms up my sleeves.

Across the alley from me, an old man whom I had taken for part of the drift of garbage twitched as the acid bit into his exposed skin. The small rats that had been nestled against his body scurried away, squeaking, as the old man dug in the trash he had been lying on for something to cover his head.

After the next party, which I hadn't been able to attend, Ronald had vided me.

"Hale, something's got to be done about that woman," he said. "She has all the decorum of a Lowtownner."

I leaned back in my chair, studying Ronald's image. On the vid, he looked even smoother-skinned than in person. "Done something horrible, has she?"

"Yes! . . . Well, no *one* thing—but you know how the woman is!" He anxiously waited until I nodded my head in agreement, or empathy, or something. "She fussed on about seceding colonies—"

"She was already onto that last time," I said.

"I know! She told everyone what she thought then, and told them all again this time, word for word! Then she went on with how beautiful her flowers are, and how long she works in her garden, as if everyone didn't already know that she's as automated as anything. And *then*"—he poked his screen for emphasis—"she tried to tell Cornice that she was wrong about something to do with Neo-Contemp music—to Cornice! Probably the foremost authority on it on the planet, if not in the Consortium!"

I nodded placatingly, waiting for him to wind down, which he eventually did.

"Please," he said, "just come to the next party. See for yourself."

"Ronald," I chided, "I'm of a dying breed: a Busy Man. And I—" I couldn't go any further; the pathos on his face would have melted any human heart.

"All right," I said. "Next one." And I snapped off the vid before he could drown me in declarations of gratitude.

IVc

Something behind me moved. I jumped away from the boarded door as it opened inward and four older Lowtownners, maybe eighteen or so, sauntered out. Their patched-together clothing protected most of their skin from the rain, and their faces were so pocked with skin cancer that acid burns there probably would have helped.

"Yo, *kisama*! You squat on our step?"

I backed up smoothly so they couldn't get behind me. "Just passing through."

"Hey, Tetsu!" one cried. "This *baka*'s a Hightowner!"

The one he spoke to looked me up and down with a crooked grin. "*Hontó da!* A real, live one!"

"Hey, how long you think he be a live one?" said another, pulling out a knife with a real metal blade.

"Long as I want," I said. "Leave me alone."

Tetsu and the rest just chuckled. They all drew knives.

What the hell, I thought, and pulled my fryer out. At the first discharge, the one who had first pulled his knife flew straight back through the air, crunched against the side of the doorway, and fell into the darkness. The other three jumped back defensively.

"He's dead," I said. "I have enough charges for you all. *Wakatta?*"

"*Wakatta'n'da,*" Tetsu answered for them all as they backpedaled a few steps, then slunk quickly out the far end of the alley.

III

I had been at the next party on Broxton, as had the usual crowd. Or so I thought at first; after some searching, I saw that Cornice wasn't there, and I kept hearing snatches of conversations recounting that whole episode from the last party.

Ronald was standing by the throb table with drink in hand, wearing a zebra body sheet with transparent stripes. There were so many red dots on his wrist he looked like he'd been popping one every five minutes. He nodded to me, then pointed with his chin to where Allysia was regaling a group of four captive listeners with a story that she obviously found uproarious.

"What's she talking about tonight?" I asked as I picked up a capsule.

"She's telling the story from last time, about her and Cornice—*she* is! I've already seen two people leave tonight; my parties'll be ruined." He groaned like a man in torment.

I could see his predicament; there were, after all, plenty of parties in Hightown, and each loss to him was a gain to someone else's. Never mind that Ronald's Broxton parties had been the standard of comparison for Hightown parties, time out of mind; life was as ruthless and sudden here as it was in Lowtown, just in a different facet.

"You couldn't just ask her not to come, or something as simple as that, could you?" I asked, twiddling the throb between my fingers.

"And have *that* get out?!" He stared at me as if I'd grown an extra eyeball. "If any sort of rumor even gets around that people get uninvited to my parties, there goes everything!" His eyes pleaded with me.

I nodded absently, popped the throb, and faded to pink. When I came back, Heaven was standing in front of us, staring at me with an amused expression.

"If you're going to throb that hard, Hale, you ought to hold onto something," she said. Her head was uncovered tonight, but there was a

giant blue spider painted on top, with legs running down almost to her ears. She reached past me to the throb bowl, lingering close just long enough for me to catch a good noseful of the pheromonal soup she used for perfume. Then she popped the capsule, throbbed as quickly as always, and flicked the empty into the bowl. As she danced away she threw a wink over her shoulder at me.

"Why does she do that?" Ronald mused as I caught my breath.

"I don't know." Between the throb and the pheromones, I was pretty fuzzy. "Maybe to show she's different from her mother—she can actually *attract* people."

"Humph. Speaking of her mother, let's get back to that; why don't you go and, ah, sample her company a bit?" Ronald nudged me with his elbow to get me going.

It took some control to keep from following the pheromone trail that I imagined I could still smell, but I managed it. I wended my way through the gyrating, small-talking, throbbing bodies, first to the drink table, and then until I found Allysia, who had moved on to fresh game.

"—so how could it really be any other way?" She twittered in derision at such people as would think that it could, actually, be some other way (whatever "it" was). She saw me join the small circle.

"Well, here's Hale!" she cried, throwing her arm around my shoulders. The gold tendrils from her ear tickled mine, and I almost spilled my drink as I jumped. "I was just saying, 'It's too bad that Hale wasn't here for the last party,' wasn't I, Joy?" Another woman, more restrained but still Edge, nodded on command.

"That's okay. I already heard."

"Oh, did you?" She frowned. "Well, I'm sure you didn't hear it like *I've* been telling it. That Cornice, she can be such a *snob*, don't you think she's such a *snob*, Hale?"

I grunted noncommittally and drained my drink. As she went on about how Cornice wouldn't know a composition from a commode, I saw Joy quietly slip out of the circle and make her way to the door. I stood silently and wished desperately for more throb until Allysia's story wound down and she looped her arm over some other newcomer.

"It's as bad as I said, isn't it?" asked Ronald as soon as I found him.

"Yeah, pretty much," I admitted.

"And?"

"And what?"

"Can you help me?"

"I don't know. Can I?"

He sighed mournfully and reached inside his zebra sheet. From inside one of the opaque patches he drew a small catch-sealed envelope. I shook it slightly as I took it. Plastic rattled inside.

"Don't worry, it's generous," Ronald said. I put it into the pocket in my belt. "Just make sure she doesn't come to the next one, all right?"

"Sure." I clapped him on the arm and headed off for some much-needed throb.

IVd

I watched Tetsu and his friends go, hoping I could leave soon myself, before they found enough courage to come back to test my bluff about extra charges.

And, apparently, I *would* be leaving quickly. I heard the pod doors behind me open.

And then, music to my ears. I heard her voice, with no trace of superiority or even confidence for the first time, very timidly say—

"Um, hello?"

V

The next day Heaven vided me. "Oh, it's so awful!" she wailed.

"What is?" I leaned forward attentively.

She tried to go on but was caught by sobs. She had silk tied under her chin like before, but this one was an appropriate black. Even without her perfume in my nose, she was captivating.

"Mummy," she finally wheezed. "She got lost going to a party last night and . . . ended up in Lowtown."

"Say not!" I exclaimed. "Is she okay?"

"She's—she's—*dead*!" she bawled, and then she pulled the black cloth sash from her head to wipe her eyes. Though it was endearing, I thought it all pretty theatrical; I new I wasn't very high on her list of People to Call With Momentous News, so she had probably cried into her sash several times already. Like mother, like daughter. I played with a paperweight until she decided it was time to get hold of herself.

"The Watch just brought her up a couple of hours ago," she said, blinking and wiping her eyes. "The Lowtowners, they beat her, then killed her . . . They even stole her new ear!" She tried to burst out crying again, but her tear glands were apparently exhausted. She saw the futility of it, and went on with her message.

"The funeral is tomorrow night. You'll come, won't you? We're having it at Ronald's place." She smiled thinly, red-eyed. "It's somehow appropriate, don't you think?"

"Oh, indeed." More than you know. And maybe, I thought, there's an extra perk to all this. "What about you? Will you be all right, on your own?"

"Oh, I won't be alone." She dabbed again at her eyes perfunctorily. "I'll be staying with Ronald for a while, a few weeks at least, until life gets back to normal." She smiled again. "He's so Edge, and very sweet, too, isn't he?"

"Unh . . . hunh." Halfway through, I tried to turn my grunt into something positive-sounding; apparently it worked.

"I'm so sorry to have bothered you with this news."

"No bother. Anything that I can do for you . . ."

Her nod was perfectly polite, and it put that thought to rest. I snapped off and sat there in front of the vid, playing with my paperweight and thinking.

It had been simple, really. A false invitation to a nonexistent party was all it took. I had figured that Allysia, like too many Hightowners, didn't bother to read addresses, and depended on the pod to get her wherever she was going. And I had also counted on her overwhelming self-confidence to keep her from asking her increasingly seedy fellow occupants of the pod where she was actually headed.

I fiddled with my new paperweight between my fingers. It was beautiful, really: a delicate scallop-shell shape, made of ceramic, laced with gold thread that tickled my fingers as I flipped it over and over. ♦

The Tower

George Guthridge

The author of more than 50 published stories, George Guthridge is an educator by profession, and has been nationally honored three times for excellence in teaching. He has written a book about his teaching methods, titled "Reversed Instruction."

As a writer, George is known to sf readers for "The Quiet," a story that was a Nebula and Hugo finalist. His newest book, out this fall from Northwest Publishing of Salt Lake City, is "The Blood-letter," an offbeat western featuring a gunman-turned-doctor and a fifteen-year-old retarded dwarf gunfighter.

The story here isn't an offbeat one—except in the sense that all science fiction is offbeat in some way. It is, as one might expect from a teacher, a story in which more than one character undergoes a learning experience; and so, too, does the reader. . . .

Returning to Tri Tier, Third Waker found his sister asleep in her quarters.

She was lying naked in the center of the cushioned room, enwrapped in dreamnetting, her arms crossed over her chest, fingertips touching opposite shoulders. The net had eaten into her flesh, tiny lines of blood crisscrossing the skin. Perhaps she had applied extra narcotic to the spiderweb-thin strands so her sleep might be sound and without dreams.

Her head was shaved, but badly, as with a piece of glass; patches of bristle mottled the scalp. Though a young woman, she looked haggard; dark flesh underlay her eyes. Third Waker set down his hoe, and knelt. Wearing only his red cape, he was covered with dust, his long blond hair matted and dirty. Struggling against tears, he impulsively clutched her foot. "Jewel!" He kissed her toes.

"Day-long life, Human," Jewel said without opening her eyes.

Third Waker did not reply. He gave the remark time to help swell his anger. Fighting Jewel might be easier if he could learn to hate her. Finally, in a level voice, he said, "I don't know how many times I've asked you not to refer to me in the generic."

The sightless eyes blinked open, milky, staring. "Some of us are proud to call ourselves Human." Then, bitterly, she added, "Isn't it a tradition?"

"Tradition?" He was quivering with rage. "Torment!" It felt strange to verbalize his emotions, even to be speaking to someone of equal intelligence. After his combat in the Tower, he had left the city for the roshona fields, relegating himself to a life among the subhuman clones.

"Yes," she said vaguely. "That too. In the future I'll try to remember *everything* you wish of me. I'll try my *very* best." Jewel plucked at the dreamnet strands and sat up, her teeth, filed to points, catching the light and gleaming. "Sometimes I forget your little wishes."

"Forget purposely."

"Perhaps."

She finished breaking the dreamstrands and slowly stood, stretching. She yawned. "So you've finally stopped communing with the flowers and dirt, and decided to return to Tri Tier and the human race."

"You don't know, then."

"Know?"

"I was summoned."

She paled and slowly closed her mouth. "Then the rumor's true," she said at last. "Dreamer intends to crown his celebration with a death."

Third Waker slowly nodded. Generations before, the Hvala had surprise-attacked and captured the city during an eclipse. Only the sixteen finest citizens had been saved from the subsequent genocide, and from those sixteen and their descendants the Hvala had cloned generation after generation of slaveborn. Soon one of the four moons would again eclipse the otherwise ever-present sun. Dreamer, leader of the Hvala, intended to honor the darkness with a combat.

"You really didn't know?"

"You think Dreamer tells me anything? He tells what he wants, when he wants. It's one of his more exquisite pleasures. But if you've been summoned, then . . . then I will be. The gods will want a final match."

Third Waker stood, gripping the hoe, trembling with dread. Beyond the room's circular windows were the fields he loved and loathed, row upon row of roshona blossoms reaching across the valley from Veiled Water to the mudstone barrens. Since the summons, the roshonas had become swollen little heads continually mocking him. He had believed the Hvala might not force him to engage in any more combats if, over-seeing the clones, he brought in a record harvest. Such a fool!

He had fought once before. He and five relatives, all of similar age, had donned black vesper robes and had waited for Dreamer to descend the Tower of Immortality. There were two bouts of three opponents

each; match-ups were chosen by lot. During the choosing Third Waker had watched his friends' expressions: hope, fear, cunning.

Mostly fear.

Of the six, he and Jewel remained.

He started for the door. "Tell Dreamer I was here but had to return to the fields," he said, though he knew he wouldn't dare return to the harvest without keeping his appointment with Dreamer. "There's work to be done. The budding is incomplete." Then he quickly added, "Another eclipse is due shortly. By then the roshona will have been harvested. The Hvala will have even greater reason for . . ." His voice trailed off. "For celebration." He could not bring himself to say *a combat*.

"The work can wait."

He halted, stood staring at his reflection in the silver door. Then he gazed downward. "With me in the fields, the clones weed forty rows faster than they used to weed fourteen. If a celebration follows harvest, rather than occurring now when blight could strike, the clones will labor twice as hard. The harvest will be completed in plenty of time for the next eclipse."

"The work," Jewel said, "can wait. Let the blossoms rot. What are they anyway, except fodder for the gods?" Then, quietly, she said, "You don't just oversee the fields. You work them like a common clone. So be it. But do not also act like a clone, forever trying to please the Hvala."

Third Waker turned and looked at her. Her lips, thin, appeared bloodless. He suddenly realized she pitied him, and he felt weak with fear. He'd be no match for her in the Tower; no match for anyone.

"I can't fight anymore." His voice cracked; he felt empty, drained even of anger. "Tell Dreamer that, Jewel. He'll listen to you." He knew his words were not only futile but infantile, yet he needed to say them; needed to do *something*.

"Are you so naive to think that Dreamer would listen? He sometimes shares my bed—forces me to share my bed. I never share his favor."

"But I can't . . . !"

"Can't fight? You needn't worry, *brother*," she said in disgust. "You may not have to." She strode past him to the door. "Because if Dreamer summons *me*"—she thumped her chest with her index finger, her blank eyes glaring toward him—"I won't respond. I'll *not* combat again!"

The door opened, and she gestured for him to leave. Then she jerked up her head and stood poised, listening.

A young girl, a clone with leather bands around her neck and belly, rounded the hallway corner and came forward. Her left hand was gripping her right wrist; her right hand, loosely fisted, was raised in front of her face. She stared at the yellow stone flickering on her middle finger.

It was one of Dreamer's rings. Jewel was being summoned.

Third Waker moved aside, allowing the messenger to enter. Then he stepped through the doorway and into the hall.

"Dreamer will have you executed—and slowly—if you refuse his commands," he told Jewel.

Her shoulders were pulled back. Small-breasted and slim, she looked statuesque. "And you?" she asked him. "Will you give the Hvala the satisfaction of watching a blind woman kill a coward?"

The door closed with the softest of whispers.

Third Waker left the sleep-chambers and moved sullenly through the main part of First Level, the lowest of the metallic city's three elliptical tiers. Had he been away so long, he wondered, that Jewel would allow suicidal hysteria, perhaps born like some bastard out of Dreamer's habitual rapes, to overwhelm her reason? She had changed so! Where was the calculating young woman who had quietly vowed upon the sun's soul to avenge her ancestors? The Jewel whose hatred of the Hvala was symbolized in those sightless eyes? He had loved that Jewel though had never touched her, knowing he might some day be forced to fight her.

And now?

Head bent, he meandered down the narrow streets, threading between houses that echoed with the clanking of machinery from the storage-bins. Grain dust, spewed out as the roshona blossoms were milled, covered the city's mirrorlike floor. He was supposed to meet Dreamer in the Tower; that he was late made his stomach throb. Oh, he'd keep the appointment; he'd *never* deny Dreamer, as much as he wanted to. Just like when he was a youngling: Dreamer had made him constantly recite doggerel glorifying the gods and ridiculing Tri Tier's paltry defense. He had always hesitated, clamping his lips shut. And had always given in. He hated himself for that, for the innumerable surrenders.

The streets were crowded. Stooped beneath bolts of cloth and wickers of grain or roshona blossoms, clones lucky enough to have positions in the city, sheltered from the dust storms the field workers endured, hurried between doors, paying little heed as he passed. A man carrying a basket of yellowfish bumped him and continued on without acknowledgement. Other clones, slump-shouldered and slack-jawed, stood in clusters, waiting for orders from a natural-born such as Third Waker. But he had no orders to give, and this day he was unsure he could have forced himself to issue orders even if some were necessary. He stepped aside, drawing his cape close, as six women pulling a huge crate at the end of a rope labored by, their eyes avoiding him. Two of the women had been cloned from his mother. Sorrow and rage swept through him as he looked at the sweat-slicked backs, the bland faces

and sun-bronzed skin, the eyes, slightly bulged, that stared mindlessly. Only naturally born youngling did not have their brains nutritionally manipulated; a procedure, Dreamer had explained, to remove rebelliousness.

But why, Third Waker asked himself, must he face death in the Tower, then if victorious live in luxuriant ease as clone-mother to a generation of slaves, while the clones were accorded rugged though complacent lives as half-witted chattel? Jewel called it destiny, insisting the clones were no more fully human than a roshona blossom was the plant proper.

Third Waker called it luck. Bad luck.

He remembered one of the dust storms he had experienced in the fields. Struggling to keep the roshona roots tamped with dirt and the blossoms shielded with tiny silken hoods, the clones had neglected sleep and thirst for fear of neglecting the plants even for moments. Several workers, collapsing from exhaustion, had lain smiling, happy to have served, as dust mounded their faces.

He shuddered and hurried from the crate-pullers.

He reached the Tower, the hub of the tier. Set at regular intervals, its oval entrances were filled with glittery hexagonals. He glanced back toward the workers, then took a deep breath to calm himself and bowed through. The hexagonal crinkled shut behind him, the light diminishing.

Unused to darkness, he fought momentary terror. A rush of heat and fear passed through him. He stared into inky blackness. Retinal color danced before his eyes.

The door opened to the Tower's inner cylinder. Within burned torches in elaborate silver cressets, flames leaping in stringy reflections up the walls. Sheathed in orange brocade, a human figure stepped into the doorway, his eyes as blankly white as eggshells, his silver hair combed back through the points of a black tiara.

"Dreamer?" Third Waker advanced hesitantly. Dreamer rarely assumed exactly the same form twice.

With the stump of a hand, the figure motioned him forward. Third Waker balked at the door, hands against the jamb. Stale air touched his face. The memories of death-cries screamed in the back of his mind.

"Fear nothing," Dreamer said, and opened his arms. "As you can see, the Tower is not activated." Third Waker stumbled inside, gasping, his footfalls sounding hollow upon the crenelated metal. It was as if the memories of that earlier combat had some physical presence that pulled the breath from him. He gripped the rail attached to the wall and glanced about uneasily; were the Tower switched on, gravity would be negated. All things within would drift upward.

An elevator that once had been a ship, the Tower was sixteen meters wide, its upper reaches lost in darkness. A metal staircase spiraled

down along the wall. At Third Waker's feet glinted three golden hooks; surrounding those were hundreds of holes, from which air would rise during combats.

Dreamer put his arm around Third Waker's shoulders, grinning paternally. "Relax, Human, and remember." His voice was soothing, his breath warm and close. "Remember your glory, when you won the applause of the gods."

Yes he remembered; he shut his eyes in pain. Matched against Silverhand, a cousin, and Bird, a nephew, he had floated high in the Tower, knife in hand as he tried to slash their throats before they could slit his.

"How beautiful you looked, Human, springing from wall to wall, so young and strong and lithe." Dreamer's stumps massaged Third Waker's neck. "How the Hvala rejoiced afterward." Fingers were emerging from the stumps, now touching Third Waker's cheeks, now easing down his arms; caressing as though loving the reality of muscle and flesh, and not the person. Third Waker remained still; the pawing would soon end. The Hvala, he knew, were nomads both of worlds and life-forms; but even in human form, which they could assume for brief periods, they apparently found the planet's environment inhospitable. Descents from Third Level, where the Hvala's delivery depot was installed, were hurried—and filled with deep interest in matters of the flesh. "Such singing and drinking!" Dreamer continued, giving Third Waker an affectionate squeeze. "Such dancing to the scoba! Fortunes were made during that combat, Human." The god grinned. "Fortunes were lost. Some believed Silverhand and Bird had greater single-mindedness, a greater sense of preservation." The grin broadened. "Others felt you had more cunning."

"It was luck."

"Luck?"

Silverhand and Bird had concentrated on each other. Fear, not cunning, had kept Third Waker out of range. He had jabbed halfheartedly with his knife and lurched away whenever the others came near. Suddenly Bird had floated limply, only the wire tether keeping him from rising along with the blood curling from his throat. Then Silverhand had swung across the Tower and locked with Third Waker, beside the stairs. "Do not murder a friend!" Third Waker had panted. Silverhand's knife hesitated. And Third Waker stabbed.

"Luck," Third Waker repeated.

"As you wish. But you made a fine showing, Human. You have reason to be proud. To win in freefall combat takes cunning, a desire to live." The eggshell eyes brightened. Was the guise, Third Waker wondered, some subtle slur about Jewel's blindness? "And now you must use that mental strength again," Dreamer went on. "That luck, as you call it. You shall fight for your preservation and for the pleasure of your gods, the Hvala."

"And if I win?"

"If? You mean *when*." The god opened a switch box inlaid into the wall. "My fortunes depend on it!"

"And afterwards?"

"You become a clone-mother, of course."

"Yes, but immediately?" Third Waker's voice quavered.

"Surely you wouldn't want to postpone such an honor." The god flipped the switch and started to rise, arms out for balance. Clutching the rail and awkwardly gripping the hoe at the same time, Third Waker floated upside down.

"What if Jewel refuses to combat?" he called out.

"Impossible!" Dreamer's voice sounded distant, hollow. "You'll convince her otherwise. Then in this Tower you'll dispatch her to that cavity in the sun's core you humans call the soul."

"But why don't you bet on her? You know her well, after all."

Dreamer chuckled. "That's why I bet as I do." Startled, Third Waker looked up to see Dreamer disappearing into darkness. Accidentally he let loose of the hoe, grabbed it just in time. "Besides, the other Hvala think I'm betting the woman!" the god called down.

Laughter echoed.

She must have changed her mind about the combat, Third Waker thought with a feeling of sick apprehension. *She hasn't said a word about not fighting.*

Naked, he and Jewel sat crosslegged in front of the cloning vats in Second Level's lab, facing one another, forearms upon knees and palms upturned. Similarly seated around them were a dozen clone-mothers. Some he knew by familiar name: Ear, Vasselia, Lannaet, Whose-Hair-Sleeps, Sweet Umbral. Others he recognized only by family, for clone-mothers tended to keep to themselves, minding the vats while natural-born who had yet to win a final combat managed the matured clones in First Level and in the fields.

The lights were dimmed. Candle glow flickered in the vats' greenish glass and twinkled among the crystalline urns of cottlewine and sofrá. The gentle sloshing of the vats and the thrumming of the transformers blended with the silence rather than disturbing it. Jewel was staring at the floor like someone peering down a cliff. Third Waker's troubled spirit hammered in his chest.

Vasselia, an old woman with yellowed, leathery skin, poured and passed. Jewel's fingers found the bowl. She drank deeply, a trickle of red wine drooling down her chin. Then, again looking down, she offered Third Waker the bowl. The wine, spicy, seared his throat. Stifling a choke, he passed to Sweet Umbral, an obese man seated on a pillow.

At last the bowl had come full circle. Holding the bowl, Vasselia

slowly stood, her legs looking like twigs in the candle light. She opened her free hand toward Third Waker and Jewel. "Not long ago," she said, "your mother started her endless journey toward the sun's soul. That day Second Level lost a fine friend and an excellent representative of clone-motherhood. But just as death takes loved ones away, so does it bring others to the forefront." She smiled toothlessly. Her eyes seemed to grin. Third Waker suppressed an irritated sigh; once Vasselja got started, she could ramble on endlessly. "One of you, surviving the combat," she went on, "will continue where your mother left off, will fill the void created by her passing. You, Jewel, or you, Third Waker, will help carry on the glory of human tradition."

She raised an index finger, her cheeks taut and her eyes bright with the exhilaration of her vision. "And what," she asked, "is that tradition? What is that glory? To be chattel for the Hvala—producers of slaves rather than owners? Is that it? Of course not! For through endurance of . . . of this"—she made a sweeping gesture toward the cloning vats—"does not the indomitable spirit of humankind harken back to a greater reality, a finer existence, to a time when Tri Tier, though population-wise little more than an outpost, loomed large in the tales of men? A time when this city was a proud port visited by the best and the worst—and always the most interesting?"

Silence. The room seemed to ring with her words. "It is said"—she lowered her voice reverently—"that colonists bound for Holyplace and Deborah's Cloud and New Hope and a hundred other worlds paused here to take on supplies and to gather strength. Shippers stopped to refresh and relax, and"—she smiled slightly—"to divest themselves of money and morals. The royalty of Tri Tier, their station determined by their being born during eclipse, were lauded throughout the galaxy for their hospitality and entertainment. The city set standards other outposts strove in vain to emulate."

She sipped from the bowl, and began again. "Then the Hvala brought tragedy, and Tri Tier, suddenly infamous, was forgotten. Except," she added, her finger quivering, "by us, descendants of The Chosen. Once picked by eclipse to rule, later picked by the Hvala to survive, now the best of Tri Tier are deigned by darkness to breed. . . ."

"And to kill," Third Waker interrupted.

All eyes but Jewel's turned his way. A vapid look entered Vasselja's gaze, shock and anger seeming to translate into disillusionment. She stared at the bowl. Sweet Umbral's bulbous face became a mix of red and pale. In horror, Ear put his fingers to his mouth.

"Leave," Third Waker told them. Grasping Jewel's wrist as she started to rise, he said, "Not you." And added, "Please."

The clone-mothers glanced at each other. Then, murmuring and casting anxious looks toward Third Waker, they wended through the

door and down the hall. "The hope and survival of humankind here in Tri Tier hangs by a thread," Vasselia told him before exiting. "The soul of the sun willing, that thread shall hold until somehow, some day, the Hvala are persuaded to leave. Then there shall be other threads, stronger threads; a braid; a rope. Until then . . ."

"Please," Third Waker repeated. "Leave."

He did not release Jewel's wrist until, shaking her head sadly, Vasselia trudged through the door. Then he let go. The hand fell. He and Jewel sat in silence, the hammering in his chest rising to his skull, blood beating in his ears.

"Do you understand darkness, Jewel?" he asked at last, his voice raspy.

She looked at him curiously, her brows bushy above the milky eyes. He gazed down her skinny, cord-lined neck, down her breasts, to the labial flesh. He realized he desired her, and the reason he'd given himself for never touching her suddenly seemed no reason at all.

Then the terror of the combats came back, and that he didn't have an erection seemed almost a benediction.

"How can I understand darkness, without having known light for so long?" Her voice was soft, still.

"Does it pain you?"

"Often." Her gaze intensified. "But pain can bring satisfaction. It's like sleeping in a dreamnet. Even without narcotic, the strands can soothe as they eat into the flesh." After a moment she added, "The pain makes me feel alive."

"The Tower and its outer chamber both hold darkness," he said. "It differs from that of sleep, or eclipses. Yet those aren't the darkness the old tales speak of: the darkness on the other side of the world, or that beyond the sun. Some say darkness exists before birth. And at the end of life, before we journey to the soul . . . a great dark sea."

"You're talking of death, not darkness."

"It's coming soon, for one of us."

"For me." She drew a sharp breath. "I already told you: I will not obey the summons."

"You said nothing to the others."

"It's goodbye no matter what, is it not?"

Her calmness made him tremble. He seemed to be standing outside himself, watching the two of them act out a nightmare wherein the dream-antagonist did not abide by the dream's internal logic, never saying or doing what was expected. "And for me, a slower death—as mother of slaves?"

"If you comply with Dreamer's commands, that's your concern!" She raised her hands, fingers spread. "These hands aren't ever going to know a friend's blood again! Do you hear me, Third Waker? Never!"

The blind eyes glared. "Perhaps you've forgotten what killing feels like. Or perhaps it didn't bother you."

"My heart cries as loudly as yours for those I killed." Third Waker fought his anger and went on slowly, "But at least *I* remember the tale of Vamury and Low, of the family Skatarr." Seeking freedom, the lovers had fled toward Dark Side four generations earlier. "Where are the Skatarrs now? The Hvala obliterated the family! Do you dare risk such a vengeance?"

"At least Vamury and Low stood up against the Hvala," she said stubbornly. "No wonder you hate to be called Human! You act like a clone, forever catering to Dreamer's wishes. You even *think* like a clone!"

"Only I can be called Third Waker." He stood, glowering down at her. "The name Human could belong to anyone."

"You should be *honored* to call yourself Human. Mother certainly was. Before her death she asked to be taken from her sickbed and brought up here to the cloning vats so she could reaffirm her glory. Not only descended from one of the sixteen Chosen, but from Janaca Lapren herself, Princess of Third Level. Did you know Mother came up here? Of course not. You were too busy with the slaves even to return for her dying."

Third Waker hung his head—from anger rather than shame. He *had* returned; but, arriving too late, he had gone back to the fields. Would Jewel believe him if he told her? Probably not. And more accusations would only make matters worse. He said nothing.

"Together, Mother and I touched each tank," she said. "Then Mother . . . started crying." Jewel's eyes were moist. Third Waker wanted to put his hand on her shoulder, but his anger imprisoned him. "She knelt, her forehead against my belly. 'Resist,' Mother kept saying over and over. I was afraid and confused, but finally I managed to ask how—how to resist. 'You will know when the knowing time comes,' Mother said."

Jewel closed her eyes. "She was gone, then. Not dead, but in a faint from which she never regained consciousness. I was alone, Mother was dying. And where were you, Third Waker? She needed you. She . . . needed you." Her lips quivered; then suddenly she put her head in her hands, sobbing. "In that instant, when . . . when I stood holding Mother and calling for help, I realized all my suffering had purpose. Blindly slashing and stabbing with such frenzy in the Tower that I overpowered the friends I'd loved. Enduring Dreamer's mockery after the blinding . . . it all was worth the pain. Do you know why Dreamer had me blinded as a youngling? Because the Hvala wished a slaughter during combat. They thought it would make for interesting odds. I've never told you that." Her cheeks looked rock-hard with anger. "I've never told anyone. But I'm telling you now, telling you one of the things Dreamer likes to whisper to me as he rapes me, so perhaps you'll help

me resist those . . .” Her voice faltered. “Those animals that call themselves gods.”

She looked up. “And you wonder why I’m proud to call myself Human! I’ve prevailed. Do you understand? Prevailed! If I choose not to combat, that’s my decision. I’ve earned that right—proved the gods wrong by winning that first combat. Imagine Dreamer’s embarrassment when this new entertainment ends before it’s begun.”

Third Waker started to leave but stopped at the door. “And what will you gain, Jewel? Dignity? Or merely death. If we all resisted as you intend to, it could mean a humanless world.”

Jewel opened her mouth to speak, then simply waved her hand as though his argument were too weak to justify a reply. “Leave,” she said at last. “Just . . . just go. And take your slave-tool with you.”

Third Waker glanced at the hoe in his hand. He palmed the door.

“I never loved you,” she said behind him. “Do you hear me? You’ve always tried to kill the things in my heart.”

“There’s been love.” He did not turn around.

“Not even friendship. Only the need to coexist. Nothing more.”

“Love,” he said once more, and then he let the door close behind himself.

He stood among the roshonas, a slight wind billowing the blossoms. Above him, Tri Tier cast arcs of reflected sunlight across the field. Mirrorlike and beautiful, the city glimmered upon its hill overlooking the floodplain and sea, its three tiers separated by sky as blue as the wings of skein bug. Two supporting triangles, one at each end of the tiers, were great black beams of stone, their aesthetic weight ponderous and proud. And piercing the middle of the tiers was the Tower, sleek as glass and dancing with light, nosing upward a hundred meters above Third Level, the highest tier.

He turned slowly, surveying the blossoms, sensing a gathering silence. It was as if the coming eclipse were bringing quiet to the land. The salt air smelled clean, and for one of the few times he could remember, felt cool. It was good he had come here, he decided. There was peace and solitude amid the flowers.

He pinched off a golden blossom, held it to the light. Yellow-gold, orange-gold, and amber tissue enfolded furry central petals of bluish white. Before the coming of the Hvala, the flowers had been a staple of Tri Tier’s populace. But ever since the gods had started not only eating the roshona but also shipping the milled flowers to other worlds, most humans refused even to go near the fields, much less consume the blossoms. Only Third Waker had ever stooped so low as to work the fields. *No, you’d rather bide among cloning vats*, he thought angrily of the clone-mothers. He suddenly wondered why, for all the time he had la-

bored here, he had never sampled a blossom. He stuck the flower in his mouth, tore off the petals with his teeth, and tossed the stem aside.

And made a face. *Just a reaction to your being told the roshonas are distasteful*, he told himself, fighting the queasiness in his stomach. Then he retched, drooling yellow bile.

Light laughter floated upon the wind.

He wheeled. Three clones, two men and a woman whose front teeth had been knocked out, stood grinning. Apparently they had been watching from behind one of the hillocks along the side of the field. All were filthy, faces and hair caked with dirt. The woman had wound a twist of metal around her upper left arm for ornament. Third Waker scowled and raised his hand to send them away. The nerve, spying on him like that!

They cowered, ducking their heads and shielding their faces, eyes squeezed shut. A sudden upwelling of shame made him lower his arm. Before him were frightened humans. Sterile, half-witted . . . human.

The eyes opened, watching him sidelong, fearfully. He sought the woman's gaze. Her eyes went downcast, then slowly, slowly lifted, Third Waker's gaze remaining steady though he found himself stepping back. When he had come to the fields after his combat he had hoped workers here would be different from those in Tri Tier: more comprehending, less distant. He'd been disappointed. They would smile at his orders; then, eyes clouding, would turn back to their flowers. He had commanded, but not led.

Cocking her head, the woman looked at him intently. Not vapid-eyed. Not slack-jawed. Her lips hinted at a smile. Her cheeks appeared to firm.

Startled, he abruptly saw her as an individual: a short, round-shouldered and round-faced woman with small, mousy ears and thin brows. She looked different from Lannaet, her prototype. The differences were subtle, almost imperceptible; and perhaps they were just a product of his imagination, or the layers of dirt. No, they were real. He was sure of that, and he was frightened to realize that his heart was suddenly, strangely pounding.

She stepped toward him, hesitated, then in a single motion snapped a reddish-silver blossom from the nearest bush and, arm extended and eyes damp, offered it to him.

His fingers were around the stem before he realized the insult. Wanting him to ridicule himself by eating another blossom? To think he'd almost been seduced by their fear!

But her smile was one of warmth, not sarcasm. And the men were somber. Her hand, pulsing, closed over the back of his, and she gently pushed the flower to his chest. To his heart.

They know of the combat, he thought. *And they care.*

He took her in his arms, trembling, his eyes moist from dust and desire and fear. She gasped yet clung to him, neither fighting the embrace nor dutifully yielding.

Outside, the darkness was spreading, covering the sea and sweeping inland until the floodplain and finally the city were touched by shadow. Soon the blackness would be complete.

Linked by a tether to one of the golden hooks, Third Waker stood shivering at the bottom of the Tower. The silence made his ears ping. It was as if the hush that accompanied eclipses had manifested itself inside the Tower, a calm in the middle of a storm.

He shifted his weight, then began moving from side to side, as much to hear the wire tether scrape as from nervousness. He checked the razorlike edge of his hoe. For final combats, opponents could choose their own weapons. He had cut the handle in two and honed the blade until it gleamed.

His shivering came in waves. *Please, Jewel, he prayed, do not come.* He would tell Dreamer how he'd pleaded with Jewel to make combat. Perhaps Dreamer would be convinced, and not take vengeance on the family.

He swallowed thickly and gazed up into the darkness where the Hvala's delivery depot was supposedly installed. Dreamer claimed the combats kept humankind psychologically strong, and competitive. Third Waker knew they only kept people in line, and docile.

Lies.

Do not come, Jewel.

The door opened and Jewel entered. A haunted, hollow darkness surrounded her eyes. She picked up the other tether and hooked it to the broad belt about her midsection. Her shoulders were slumped, and she wore the vesper cape loosely over the left shoulder, hiding her arm, the tip of a blade visible.

Footsteps rang upon the stairs above Third Waker's head. He glanced up, stifling the cry that leaped into his throat.

Sheathed in black and carrying a black roshona, his outstretched arms draped in dreamnetting, Dreamer sported a weathered, wrinkled face accented by black hair hanging in greasy lanks. Skin blemished with age spots sagged upon his cheeks and beneath his chin. Eyes as dull black as the flower looked out from sockets underlain by loose, puffy flesh. A face of death.

The god grinned as he reached the bottom of the Tower. He approached the combatants.

Jewel crouched, unclasping her cape and tossing it aside, her milky eyes staring straight ahead as Dreamer placed the net over her. *It's not enough for you to have humans kill each other,* Third Waker thought,

glowering at Dreamer. *You insist on combatants wearing the nets. Why—does it make for more interesting odds?*

Jewel showed no emotion. She shifted her weapon, a sword, to her right hand and adjusted the net over her shoulders and buttocks with an ease that was frightening.

Dreamer approached Third Waker with a second net.

"Attack her left," the god whispered as he laid the web across Third Waker's shoulders and let the bulk of the net cascade down to cling to the flesh. "I've managed to have extra narcotic applied to that side." Then in a normal voice he said, "The dreamnet is powerfully doused. Keep that in mind. Jewel has similarly been made aware."

Confused and angered, Third Waker plucked at the strands, arranging the web. He had not worn a dreamnet since his other combat, and the prickly silk irritated his skin. He tried unsuccessfully to keep from shivering. Any movement allowed the net to cut quicker and deeper.

"The luck of darkness to both of you," Dreamer said as he opened the switch-box. "And honor to the victor."

He pulled the control lever. Air hissed through the floor holes, chilling Third Waker. To keep from rising, he and Jewel grabbed their tethers at the hooks. Their capes billowed upward, floating alongside Dreamer as he began to rise. The god clapped his hands, the sound seeming to clang within Third Waker's skull.

Out of the upper darkness emerged the other Hvala, upside-down, walking beneath the stairs. Holding black roshonas, they wore flowing white robes and white hair that, neatly combed, turned under at the shoulders. Some had donned Jewel's face; others, Third Waker's. That, at least, he had expected.

Down, down they spiraled, the first of the line halting near the Second Tier landing, where they would be out of range from the tethers' farthest reaches. A hundred, a hundred and fifty, and still the gods kept coming. He had never seen so many.

Positioning himself, also upside-down, beneath the Second Tier landing, Dreamer held out the roshona with both hands.

"Combatants!" he bellowed. Then, in a soft voice, "Humans. The blackness has arrived. The land is stilled by darkness. Your destiny awaits: one of you to be ennobled as a clone-mother; one to be sacrificed beneath the eye of the eclipse." He lowered the blossom. "You may begin."

Jewel let go of the hook and sprang upward, floating in a diagonal toward the stairs. About fifteen meters from the floor she seized the stairs-rail and pulled herself up hand over hand, the slack in the tether diminishing.

Must get above her. The combatant highest in the Tower could take the offensive nearly as easily as the other, and could more readily defend.

For a moment, Third Waker could not let go of the hook. His hands seemed apart from him, things with minds of their own. Was the dreamnet affecting him so quickly?

His fingers opened. He pushed off but, awkward in the weightlessness, overcorrected; on his side, he had to flail his arms. Legs bent upward like the rudder of an overturned boat, he too made for the stairs, though lower than Jewel. He reached the stairs and clung to the rail, breathing heavily.

Directly above him, where the stairs curved around again, Jewel waited.

She was facing outward, holding the rail with her feet, the tether's slack gathered into a loop at her waist. A taut line could send her swinging across the Tower even if she failed to get a good spring off the wall. Only by remaining well above or below the arc of that swing could he hope to stay out of range. Climb undetected above that arc, however, and he would have the advantage.

He hand-walked upward another meter. Jewel's head cocked toward the sound. His stomach tightened. He hand-walked another step, careful to be silent. Again her head cocked. She shifted the sword from her right hand to her left, the tip waving menacingly. Third Waker froze. He tried to control his breathing. Who could tell what that woman could hear?

Jewel adjusted her position on the rail, and again faced outward. Of course! Third Waker snorted at his ignorance. She was sensing vibrations in the rail, not sound.

He drifted away from the stairs, holding the rail lightly with one hand. How to climb higher? Let go, and he would float upward. But until he gained a higher position, turned and readied himself, he'd be vulnerable. Miss the upper handhold, and the natural pull of the tether would move him to the Tower's center, where he would dangle helplessly.

Unless . . .

He eyed a spot several meters up on the opposite wall, a few meters below where the first of the Hvala were standing, and began coiling the tether against his belly. If he could cross the Tower and immediately swing back, playing out tether as he went, maybe he could get above her without coming into range. He glanced up. Jewel's head was jerked down toward him, and she had hunched her shoulders, obviously anticipating a charge.

Must have an excellent swing and a soft landing on the other side, or you'll never make it back across, he told himself. He stared at the spot until his eyes brimmed and he seemed not to be looking at the wall but at some point beyond. He gripped the rail, tensing, energy building within his legs. His right arm was in front of his face for pro-

tection, the hoe blade uplifted. He drew closer to the rail, in as tight a crouch as possible. His entire body tingled.

Do not murder . . . He struggled against the thought, squinting. He tried to crouch tighter. *Do not murder your . . .*

He leaped. Slack uncoiled as, sailing outward and up, he arced toward the far wall. Jewel's face lurched left, then right. She seemed aware something was happening, but was unsure what. The sword changed hands again.

Halfway through the arc, Third Waker threw his legs forward and up, the weight-shift giving him added momentum and height. Dream-net dug into his flesh. Narcotic-induced drowsiness surged through him. The wall came up abruptly, seeming to slant at an odd angle. He tried to concentrate on landing deftly, gathering his springing-strength for the next arc. His eyes slitted with the effort.

He met the wall in a squat and shoved off again, releasing the last of the coiled tether. With luck he would alight back at the stairs about two meters above and opposite Jewel.

The dreamnet cut deeper. The drowsiness entered his shoulders: relaxing, emollient. The stairs seemed to move away rather than nearer. He looked at the faces of the Hvala as if through a tunnel. He was arcing in slow motion. Jewel appeared to his left and below him. Above her head, the flames from one of the torches broke into kaleidoscopic color. Flashes of light erupted from Jewel's sword. The flashes intensified and lengthened. Brighter. Closer.

Jewel was sailing his way.

Her sword blindly slashing, she came toward him, her eyes abnormally milky and wide. *Scream!* a voice shouted within him. *Send her away!* Third Waker blinked in confusion. Wouldn't sound betray his position? He stretched out, trying to force the arc faster. They were going to intersect.

He wrenched around to avoid her.

Too late. He looked up through tired, sluggish eyes as the sword, the slow-motion sword, slashed down. He tried to block it with the hoe. . . .

And shrieked as the blade sliced his wrist.

The force of the blow halted his swing, and for a moment he spun slowly in the middle of the Tower, staring stupefied as the cut reddened. The pain came in slow, pulsing surges. It seemed to take all his effort to close his mouth, to shut off the sound of his own voice.

Then Jewel began clawing at his back. She gripped his hair. Third Waker tried to lift the hoe. It suddenly seemed a great weight, raising only after terrible strain. Jewel clung on, gasping and twisting, sensing the intended blow. The two of them revolved in a semicircle and were spun back around, like sticks tied to strings.

Again the sword lifted, fuzzy and vague. A quiet panic, a warm, para-

lyzing drug, moved through him. *Arm. Raise your arm. Block the blow.* He stared at the cut across his wrist and tried to remember which of his arms wasn't hurt. *Left side. Attack her left side.* He looked at his arms again. Then as if in a dream he watched his eyelids lift, saw the glint of steel, and waited for the blade to cut down across the back of his neck. *Now you, Jewel, shall be clone-mother,* he thought dully. *Pleasant . . . death for . . . Third Waker.*

Suddenly, using him for a springboard, Jewel pushed away.

Third Waker blinked, and the torches threw handfuls of light-shards.

Jewel arced toward the grinning, gawking, upside-down faces.

Something . . . happening. Have to . . . get this . . . off! He tore at the dreamnetting. Broken strands of net, caught in the air currents, twisted and curled upward. He shook his head, struggling to clear his mind. Then, even in his stupefaction, he understood why Jewel had assumed the position she had on the stairs—opposite, though some ten meters below, where Dreamer was standing beneath the Second Tier landing.

She hadn't intended to fight; only wished it to appear that way so she could catch the Hvala off guard.

Third Waker kicked free from the last of the net.

The scene before him was distorted, something viewed in a convex mirror. Jewel sailed up toward the stairs, her tether playing out in quickly disappearing loops. Then the line was tight, her sword upraised. She released the last of her gathered tether as she neared the stairs. There was a sudden intake of breath—whether from her or from the Hvala he wasn't sure; then she tugged down on the line and unhooked herself without breaking the momentum.

Her timing was perfect. The force of the swing drove her forward as she floated up, enabling her to penetrate the margin of safety the Hvala always left themselves.

Laughing hysterically, she stabbed out.

The first thrust found nothing. Dreamer flung himself against the wall to avoid the second. Luck saved him. Luck, and Jewel's sightlessness.

The sword went through the chest of a Hvala on the step above Dreamer.

The god flung his arms wide. His mouth opened in a silent shriek, and his eyes crossed as he looked up at the sword sticking into his sternum. The roshona drifted up. He doubled over, green spew bursting from his mouth and rising lazily, and started to float up, crumpled, beneath the underside of the stairs, his robe spattered.

Jewel was thrown backward as she yanked out the sword. She slashed again, screaming her rage, somehow realizing she'd missed Dreamer. Back and forth she futilely swung the sword as she rose. The Hvala were now out of range, and there was nothing from which she

could push off to reach them. They watched calmly, black eyes moistly serene, as she floated past.

She stopped swinging the blade. Her mouth opened in a snarl, showing her filed teeth. She made a deliberate pass with the sword, as if to assure herself the space before her was her own, devoid of enemies. Then, perhaps to assuage the Hvala's vengeance, she held the weapon with both hands, blade up, the tip toward her throat. The sword jerked. Her body cramped. The blade-tip stuck through the side of her throat.

The upper darkness enclosed her.

Dangling in the center of the Tower, Third Waker stared open-mouthed. Did she expect him to join her in suicide?

He looked at the hoe.

Suicide with such a weapon would be graceless. Was that why he'd chosen it, unconsciously attempting to demean whatever death might occur during the combat?

The darkness belongs to the gods. You must journey in the other direction, some inner voice told him. He struggled to listen, fighting the narcotic's lingering, overpowering ease. He continued to spin slowly, the Tower revolving dreamily. *Victory, below. Lies below.* But what?

Dreamer was distracted, gazing in disgust toward where other Hvala were pushing their dead comrade from beneath the stairs. Clutching the hoe in his armpit, Third Waker started down the tether. The wire cutting into his hands seemed a painful ecstasy.

He reached the bottom and, grasping the tether close to its lower hook, righted himself. The cold metal of the floor against his bare feet sent needles up his legs. Then his gaze leaped to the far wall, and a chill of realization cut through him.

The switch!

The Hvala were upside down, weren't they?

Clumsily looping the wire tether around his hand, he threw himself forward. His fingers scrabbled to open the panel door. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Hvala suddenly stare down, eyes dark with terror. He was joyous with excitement. The panel door clanged open. *Hurry!*

He wrenched down the lever.

Dreamer laughed and folded his arms.

Third Waker threw the lever again and again, raging, his hand a blur. Dreamer sneered. Third Waker pulled the lever a final time; then his shoulders sagged and he floated wearily half a meter off the floor. In the gods' eyes was the look of defeat. His own defeat. Just as the terror had been his own: a terror mixed with hope. They merely had been imitating. Ridiculing.

"And what now, Human?" Dreamer asked angrily.

Third Waker stared at the floor. His face felt tight; he wished he

could cry. The short length of tether turned him in a small circle. "I shall do your will," he mumbled.

"You expect life after such an exhibition?" Dreamer gazed down with disgust. "Can any member of your family ever again be entrusted with clone-motherhood? Are we supposed to be impressed with your *resourcefulness* at the switch? As if your kind hadn't tried the same thing before! You humans never learn."

He turned toward the others. "Release your blossoms if you wish the family Lapren to be negated. If only this human is to die, hold them downward. Blossoms hidden behind your robes shall mean life. A simple majority shall decide the question."

Smiling grimly, Dreamer looked down again at Third Waker, his back to the other gods as if to give them time and privacy in which to make their choice. Third Waker lowered himself until, holding the tether near its ground point, he could keep his feet on the floor. His heart thumped wildly. Giddy with exhaustion and fear and the effects of the dreamnet, he wanted to unhook the tether and drift up through the Tower as if upon a cloud, his eyes closed and his trembling calmed. But he had to remain still; silence and confidence were his only weapons. He waited for blossoms to float up into the darkness. *Let them kill me—no one else*, he begged the sun, the soul the ancients had called Lord. *Spare the family Lapren!*

He gazed up.

A spiral of downturned blossoms sealed his fate but saved his family. Not a single blossom had been released. *Not even one?* he wondered. *Do they all think alike?*

Dreamer glanced toward the blossoms and nodded. Then he said to Third Waker, "By default have you won the combat. By the decision of the gods are you to lose your life." The god opened his arms, palms forward: a look of conciliation. "Your execution will be a terrible waste, Human. We have no desire to negate you—to negate any of your kind. We have sought only to restructure human society along more efficient lines, and to use our delivery depot to connect the planet to passing Hvalan ships—and thus to worlds we find more favorable. Were you humans to prove yourselves worthy, this planet might be yours again, in exchange for whatever annual tribute pleases us."

"But not now," Third Waker said.

"After such a display of rebellion? How could we dare even think of granting you humans any self-rule at all?" Dreamer sadly shook his head as he gestured toward the stair where the fallen Hvala had stood. "For now there shall only be death. Your death. Make amends with family and friends and conscience, Human. The next time I summon you, you'll be taken from here and staked out upon the fields, to wither beneath the sun like an ill-bred flower. Run away from that death, and all

humankind shall know our vengeance." For a moment he seemed to be listening, as if to the words' echo. Then he and the other Hvala turned and started upward, a coil of white robes and white hair, black blossoms, and solemn faces.

Third Waker stood with fists clenched at his sides, smiling a desperate smile.

The cloning vats cast their usual greenish glow throughout the lab, the gentle sloshing of the amniotic fluid seeming to complement the unhurried work of the aproned clone-mothers.

Third Waker leaned against the wall, scowling, arms crossed impatiently. He was gripping the hoe so tightly his hand felt bloodless. *Have I such time to waste?* he thought. *My life filters away by the moment!*

On the fourth finger of his left hand pulsed a summoning ring. Dreamer had instructed the clone messenger to let Third Waker keep the bauble.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Vasselia came over and, eyes downcast, seated herself at Third Waker's feet. The other clone-mothers followed her example, Sweet Umbral taking a pillow from one of the closets and carrying it beneath his arm like a notebook. Vasselia glanced sidelong, assuring herself everyone was seated. Then, cupping Third Waker's fingers in her hand, she pressed her cheek to the yellow ring. "You shall be missed," she told Third Waker, gazing into his eyes.

"There's no need for this death," he said.

"There's never need for unnatural death, yet its existence is a fact of life." Her eyes were gentle with concern.

"You've considered what I've told you?" He tried unsuccessfully to keep his voice from trembling.

"Yes." Again the sidelong glance. The others nodded.

"And?"

After a moment's hesitation, she replied, "Decided nothing. There needs to be more deliberation, even if the idea is to be rejected."

"There's no time!"

"There's always time, Third Waker. Perhaps just not for you." Her eyes again went downcast.

He had expected and feared her answer, but now her words disarmed him. A feeling of helplessness overwhelmed him, and he stood weak-kneed, his head pounding. *Should have known they'd do nothing*, he told himself. *Should have known!*

He had known, though he had fought the certainty. What he had asked of them was tantamount to mass suicide. An insanity, yet founded on solid reasoning. Hadn't Dreamer himself given him the idea? The god had mentioned that others had tried the Tower's switch. But no families had been wiped out as a result, a fact dramatically illustrated

when none of the Hvala voted for family death. The destruction of the Skatarrs, Third Waker had argued before the clone-mothers, must have been a necessary example the gods could not afford to repeat. They needed an ongoing gene pool for clone production and thus crop protection.

"Think what you're asking," Vasselia said. "We're supposed to tell the Hvala that, training us to kill our own kind, they've trained us too well?"

Having already answered that objection, Third Waker now did not reply. Swear you're united in your determination to commit riot if the Hvala do not leave, he had explained. Threaten to destroy the cloning vats and to destroy yourselves. Warn Dreamer that Jewel's sacrilege could become the norm.

"It . . . it won't work," she said.

"And this will?" Third Waker waved the hoe angrily toward the vats. "How much longer will the killings continue? How many generations?"

"It's not such a bad thing," Sweet Umbral interjected.

"For the survivors, yes."

The fat man opened his mouth to speak, then did not. A look of hatred flickered within his eyes, and Third Waker found himself taken aback, as if the inspiration of his plea had suddenly drained. He saw himself seated on that pillow, arguing with Jewel. Her position had seemed so *right*, so real . . . so hopeless.

"One person cannot alone drive away the Hvala," Third Waker muttered. It was a lame statement, and he wished he had not spoken.

"No need to drive them away," Vasselia said. "Eventually the gods will tire of this place and move on to other worlds. You'll see."

"Doubtlessly not," Third Waker replied, but felt no satisfaction when Vasselia, lips tightening, flushed. He gazed down at the hoe, his reflection distorted in the honed surface. When he had stepped from the Tower weeks before, leaving behind the delirium of the combat and of his sentencing, his heart had thudded with ferocious hope. Now, having communed twice with the clone-mothers, he realized his emotion was delusion born upon desperation.

He glanced toward Vasselia. She was staring at the floor. Lannaet avoided his gaze. Sweet Umbral's eyes were glaring slits. The clone-mothers seemed fleshy husks with minds he could not fathom. Feeling very old, very tired, he closed his eyes. Gone were the logic and rhetoric he had invented and practiced. All he could think of were the roshona fields . . . an offered blossom. A woman's face . . . a clone's face: mischievous, caring, submissive. Mouse ears and a fearful little smile. For an instant the burbling of the vats became light laughter riding a flood-plain breeze.

When he blinked open his eyes, he felt strangely at peace. He smiled

at the clone-mothers. "I've worked the fields alongside the clones both as overseer and as laborer," he said, the words suddenly coming effortlessly. "At first I felt joy in the work. An odd, ugly joy. I labored with teeth gritted, chopping down with the hoe with all my strength, using it not as a tool but as a club. My joy was one of defiance—against you, against the Hvala and the Tower, against . . ." He paused. "Against myself. It was not the joy of work, or of the giving of self. It was hatred: rancorous, heady . . . consuming."

He moved to the nearest vat and stood looking at the fetus. "I think that same ugly, self-serving, defiant joy possessed Jewel. She didn't try to kill Dreamer for humankind, but for herself. Perhaps that's what has frightened me the most: realizing how deeply hatred had burrowed into her heart. Until just a moment ago, I tried to convince myself her hatred was a good thing, viable and just. But I can't accept it, no matter how much I know it may be true. And no matter how far such hatred, transferred to you, might go toward saving my life . . . and possibly freeing Tri Tier."

He turned from the vat and faced the clone-mothers. "You see, I also experienced another joy in those fields. One you probably cannot understand, one the clones can understand but probably couldn't explain even if they could speak. They are subservient, those clones you call subhuman . . . but not to the Hvala." He shook his head. "No, not to the gods. They worship work: the unthinking, selfless rhythm of the hoe, the biting of pull-ropes into their flesh, the sanctity of sleeping without dreamnets or drugs. They know the ache of muscles," he said softly, "not of the soul."

He struggled to continue. "Once . . . once, a long time ago, I believed myself cowardly for wanting to stay in those fields, shielded from the Tower, and from you, and from Jewel, and from these vats. But perhaps fear didn't drive me there. Perhaps it was only a retreat to a place where a hoe is a tool, not a weapon."

"Perhaps," Sweet Umbral said. "Or perhaps, as you imply, you were only rationalizing."

Third Waker shrugged and, smiling, stepped between Ear and Whose-Hair-Sleeps, and walked toward the door.

"You're leaving?" Vasselia asked in a voice full of despair. "Don't be offended by this cynic!" Her eyes flashed toward the fat man.

"I must go."

"To face Dreamer . . . and death?"

"To face friends."

Third Waker stood slump-shouldered at the intersection of two concourses in First Level, a roshona bush in one hand, the hoe in the other. Workers pushed by—not touching him, but sometimes seeming to

peer at him from the corners of their eyes. Much of the harvest was in. Many field workers had returned to the city to help with the milling. In the fields he hadn't found the clones he was seeking. Hadn't found the woman he was seeking.

He sensed a voiceless urgency among the passing clones. It seemed to impinge upon the stifling, grain dust-laden air, buffeting him like a wind. But none of the workers stopped or acknowledged him. All carried boxes or baskets or appeared intent, though trudging along half-mindfully, upon important destinations.

The roshona's blossoms—silver-blue, mauve, umber, striped red and white—caught the light from the in-ceiling lamps. When he had worked the fields, he had only seen two or three bushes with blossoms of markedly different colors. Bastard bushes, he had called them. Genetic misfits. Now, returning to the fields briefly, he had stumbled upon one. He couldn't believe his luck. Luck! He snorted in self-ridicule. Within moments he would be headed for the Tower.

A small-eared woman with an upturned nose looked up at him through the branches.

Something cold ran down his spine. The same woman he had met that time in the fields? Couldn't be. He shook his head in disbelief. He felt his gaze harden and his throat tighten. Yes, one of Lannaet's progeny. But not the same woman.

Surely not.

He lowered the roshona to see her better. Her eyes demurely closed. Her hands were clasped against her belly, her fingers arthritic-knuckled and dirty. Her arms were thin and sinewy.

No twist of metal adorned her bicep.

She lifted her lashes, and his gaze met hers. He saw moist, caring eyes. He touched her shoulder. She flinched but did not look away. Then she smiled slightly. Her front teeth were missing.

The breathing of a crowd—clones carefully edging toward him and the woman—roared in his ears. Trembling, his fingers slid down to her wrist. His eyes were brimming. "I'm Third Waker," he said. "You understand? Not simply 'Human.' And you? . . ." His voice broke. *Still the fool! Asking a clone her name! As if she could tell you even if she had one!*

Abruptly he thrust the roshona forward.

She received it in the crook of her arm, as though holding the bush awkwardly against her breasts, the blossoms against her cheek and neck, were the most natural thing in the world.

"A gift," he managed to say, dismayed by her seeming ease. "A gift of . . ." He stumbled for words. "A gift full of goodbyes," he said at last. Letting loose of her hand, he plucked a tawny petal and crumpled it softly between his fingers. "Each petal a death. Each . . . each beautiful." His voice quivered. "Each lending itself to the whole."

His hands were shaking so violently he had difficulty pinching off another blossom. Her eyes registered alarm at the theft, but warmth returned to her gaze when he stuck the flower in the hand of the first man he saw, a short clone with the muscular physique Sweet Umbral had once possessed. A sharp intake of breath rippled through the crowd. The man gazed stupefied at the roshona. "Take it," Third Waker hoarsely whispered. He felt anger surfacing, and was unable to stop it. "Take the gift!"

The clone's eyes lifted, shiny with confusion. Around him the other clones stood with heads cocked puppetlike, mouths open, arms dangling. The man's mouth opened and closed slowly, like that of a beached fish. Third Waker cupped his hand around the man's.

"This is the symbol of your god," Third Waker said. "It's the land that's Lord. Not the Hvala, or the darkness of the Tower. Not the sun, either. The land." He fought his trembling, the man's face and the metallic building-walls and streets swimming within his vision as he eased the clone's hand upward. "The land."

Then the flower was within the clone's mouth, and Third Waker's hands were on the man's cheeks, feeling the mouth work, the muscles and sun-baked skin. The man's eyes were wet mirrors. "Resist the false gods," Third Waker said. *And their vainglories*, he tried to continue, but suddenly the clone was also trembling, and gripping Third Waker's wrists.

Third Waker held the man and, face uptilted and eyes closed, he sobbed with happiness and fear. When he opened his eyes he saw other hands reaching toward him, breaths and tiny guttural cries raging in his ears, the clones jockeying forward, eyes slightly protruding as if with desire. He gave away flower after flower, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Then the blossoms were gone and he turned, stumbling, toward the Tower.

He staggered three steps before his knees gave way. Arms went around his waist, trying to support him, as he realized only vaguely that they were the arms of the woman from the fields. She could not hold him. He collapsed sobbing to his knees, his arms around her legs and his cheek against her belly. She was leaning over him, her fingers clutching his hair, and he could feel within her his own terrible shuddering. "Jewel," he cried. "Jewel."

"You've come for death, Human?"

Head down, stomach knotted, Third Waker stood in darkness, in the Tower. The crowd had left him outside. When he had come through an oval entrance and into the Tower proper, the hexagonal had crinkled shut with almost cynical slowness. Then the inner cylinder door had

clanged shut behind him, and Third Waker felt his heart seal. He knew he could kill Dreamer without compassion or remorse.

"Yes. For death."

Footsteps padded against metal as the god came down several more steps. Though the Tower amplified the sound, Third Waker guessed that Dreamer was about halfway between the Second Tier landing and the bottom floor. He shifted the hoe from his left hand to his right. *Only a few more steps*, he told himself.

"A large humplike rock sits in the middle of the roshona field nearest Veiled Water," the god said, continuing down.

"I know the place." *Come, Dreamer.*

"Shackles and chains are bolted into the rock."

"Yes, shackles. Chains." He turned the haft slowly in his hand, his palm pulsing.

"Place your back against that rock, your wrists and ankles against the shackles. The shackles lock automatically." Dreamer gave a slight, almost polite cough. "The sun shall do the rest."

The blood left Third Waker's face. His gaze snapped upward. "You'll not attend the execution? Will none of the Hvala?"

"Why witness something so meaninglessly?"

"To watch the agony?" Third Waker asked desperately. He wanted as many Hvala as possible near him; to kill as many as possible. "And . . . and to bet on how long I survive?"

The words hung in the darkness.

Finally Dreamer said, "An excellent idea. But we must decline. There is too much work, what with the harvest nearing completion. A record crop, incidentally. You are to be commended." Then he added, "A pity. I might have learned to enjoy you."

Third Waker heard Dreamer open the switch-box at the Second Level landing. He groped for the rail. If he could not kill several Hvala, maybe killing Dreamer alone would suffice. Maybe that would assuage his anger.

"Don't I deserve a final caress from my god?"

Dreamer chuckled. "The Hvala are nomads, Human. Not imbeciles."

Tumblers clicked. Third Waker uttered a cry, expecting to begin free fall, then realized his feet were still on the floor. The sound had not come from above. Gravity had not been negated.

Someone was opening the cylinder door.

"Dreamer! Precious lord!"

Vasselia.

Suddenly Third Waker found himself being jostled back as, grunting, people crowded inward. There was labored breathing, murmured oaths, the smell of body heat.

"You bring a mob, Vasselia?" Dreamer demanded.

"We clone-mothers have come to beg audience."

"And?"

"Spare Third Waker," Vasselia said. "Spare the planet. And for that, reap unending reward."

"You speak in circles, old woman," Dreamer said. "Perhaps you too should have a traitor's place beneath the sun."

"Perhaps I deserve even worse," Vasselia said. Third Waker gripped the rail, thinking Dreamer might send everyone floating upward head over heels. "But please: first hear me."

"Your god listens."

"Tri Tier, hosting the ships of men, was once legendary for its graciousness—and its decadence," Vasselia began. "Then the lord Hvala arrived, and taught the planet's humankind to use the Tower to cull the physically and psychologically weak, each generation of natural-born as strong or stronger than the last. Is Jewel's and Third Waker's treason testimony to that experiment having failed? Surely the Hvala, wise and experienced in galactic matters, know otherwise. The actions of Jewel and Third Waker, though monstrous, bespeak of the Tower's success, not failure. Was not Jewel, slightly build and blind, the most capable combatant ever to enter here, defeating her early opponents with stunning ease and apparently handling Third Waker as if he were no more than a child? And Third Waker—did he not oversee a harvest so great a hundred new roshona bins are having to be constructed?"

There was a silence, as though she were expecting an answer to her rhetorical questions. She cleared her throat and continued.

"You and this tower, lord, have created a finer species than existed here before your coming; a magnificent humanity. So let Tri Tier's humankind prove their worth. Let us show what stock we come from: descendants of The Chosen, versed by heritage in the art of entertainment—mistresses and catamites all. Let us again play the host—host no longer to the races of men, but to one lord, the Hvala. Be not just a god, Dreamer, but a guest. A master not forever present is best entertained. Leave Tri Tier, and return frequently for tribute—for whatever you desire. Do that, and the new humankind you have developed will not only worship but adore you."

Hesitant breathing punctuated the ensuing silence. There was movement up in the Tower, Dreamer perhaps stepping toward the stairs rail. "You are right," he said at last, and a murmur of hope and gratitude swept through the crowd. "Tri Tier's humankind has changed since the Hvala's coming. You are no more adept at lying, but you do it more readily."

The tone of the murmuring changed to one of anger. There was a nervous shuffling of feet.

"Like most liars," Dreamer went on, "you believe the tales you

weave . . . that generations before you have woven. But because you have challenged me to make a decision concerning your existence, insipid though that challenge is, I shall give you an answer. Not the answer you seek, but an answer to your lies. An answer to your *myths*. I shall tell you the truth."

Third Waker heard the god's footsteps as Dreamer descended more stairs, but he was no longer gripping the hoe so tightly. There was something in Dreamer's tone that dispelled Third Waker's hate. . . .

"You believe Tri Tier was gracious, though richly decadent," Dreamer said. "That much is correct. But it was also degenerate."

He waited for the whispers to die down before continuing.

"Rule in your society was based on eclipses, but over the generations that basis had changed. Rule had come to include *children* of those born during darkness. And then children's children, until finally the pyramid of society was inverted." He kept descending, but Third Waker's grip continued to slacken the more Dreamer spoke. "We swooped down, we Hvala—your gods. Our warcloud enshrouded your world. We expected you would stave off the cloud, a truce would be declared, and you would grant us trade and military concessions. But your people either refused to man your defenses, or had forgotten how. All but sixteen of your people died. Do you understand?"

When no one answered, he said, "No post-battle genocide; no Chosen. Those were myths your ancestors invented and we perpetuated. Your hatred of us has kept you humans alive while we rebuilt your society and instilled in you the competitiveness and self-assertion your pre-battle ancestors had lost."

"You claim yourself beneficent, then?" Vasselia's voice was laced with rancor.

"Beneficent? No. Omnipotent, yes. But not omnipresent. A world we cannot inhabit is useless to us without someone to farm or mine its resources."

"But how are we to know that this . . . this *rewriting* of history isn't also a lie?"

"Because I'm your god, Vasselia!" Dreamer boomed the words, his voice cruel. Then, softer, he said, "And because . . . because I was there, at the battle."

So Dreamer is a god! Third Waker told himself. *So many generations gone by!* He shut his eyes in bewilderment, wondering how terrible would be the torment of being chained upon the rock.

"Further protest can only mean greater dishonor," he heard a clone-mother whisper.

The cylinder door creaked as someone opened it. Then it clanged against the wall. Third Waker blinked against sudden light.

Flickering city-light, invading the outer chamber as the oval en-

trance's hexagonals apparently were being opened and closed, enveloped the inner cylinder in dust-moted haze. On tiptoes Third Waker strained to see over the heads of the clone-mothers and out the cylinder door.

"Lord god the sun!" a clone-mother gasped.

"What is it?" Third Waker cried. "Tell me!" He clutched the shoulders of the man in front of him—it was Sweet Umbral—and tried to boost himself up. But the effort was to no avail. Darkness again engulfed him. Who or whatever had been coming through the hexagonals was not doing so any longer.

Sweet Umbral grunted, perhaps pushed by someone in front of him, and staggered back. Third Waker, off balance, was thrown against the wall. He grabbed for the rail, somehow managed to find it just before being swung around, the hoe scraping against metal.

"Back!" someone commanded—Ear, Third Waker thought, though in his confusion and upwelling terror he couldn't be sure. People began shoving against him as he fought to regain his feet. Something was forcing back the contingent of clone-mothers. "Everyone to the rear!" the voice said again.

Light flared.

Another; a tiny torch.

Another and another and another.

Third Waker put his palm flat against the wall and, seizing the shoulders nearest him, managed to hoist himself high enough to get his foot on the rail. Suddenly he was above the clone-mothers, and looking down.

At the cylinder door and massed in the outer chamber were hundreds of clones, eyes glistening in the dancing light as they passed fire from one to another. But the lights were not traditional torches. They were roshona bushes. Dried or perhaps oil-soaked, the blossoms were burning.

A great, guttural roar went up among the clones, and they lifted the roshonas to arms' length. *Like a thousand suns*, Third Waker thought. *A thousand candles to honor the land. All come to pay tribute to Third Waker's passing.* His heart leaped with a joy that made his eyes water.

A cry from above interrupted his thoughts. It was a strangled cry, like that of an injured animal, then was suddenly cut short. "You would threaten to burn the fields?" the voice shrieked.

Third Waker could now see Dreamer in the dimness above. A bluish-white head with thick mastoid processes, a scalp bulging with enormous veins. A vertical mouth slit fibrillating with lacy flesh ran vertically between tall black eyes. Dreamer's gown was black, and hung loosely draped over narrow shoulders. Flaps of puckered flesh dangled be-

neath arms so skinny as to be almost tubular. The hands were finlike. "You would dare destroy Hvalan property? You, all of you"—he waved his arms—"whose form, whose very existence, is nothing more to the Hvala than a tired comedy?"

The vertical mouth rippled with nervous laughter. "For one worthless human you bastard beings would risk so much? We, who could obliterate you in an instant?"

The god gazed down at Third Waker. "Indeed, Human. Such a risk. Indeed!"

Then, throwing his head back, Dreamer cackled, spittle drooling from the vertical mouth.

Third Waker moved through First Tier, hurrying toward the Tower, barely aware of the constant clatter and grain dust. It seemed a setback that the workers did not nod or otherwise acknowledge him. A month had gone by since the incident in the Tower, and the clones seemed to have forgotten the whole thing. But almost half a generation must pass, he knew, before full-minded adult clones peopled these streets. He sighed determinedly. The first laws he would pass once the planet was rid of the Hvala would be ones abolishing slavery—in any form.

He ducked through one of the Tower's hexagonals and entered the inner cylinder. Torches were burning. Dreamer was waiting, standing on the Second Level landing, his head featureless except for a pursed mouth and a queue of red hair curled around his neck like a snake. His robe, silver and sequined, trailed along the steps. Small-shouldered, he wore no arms.

"I understand you've requested to see me," the god said. "Some of the other Hvala insist I should not transport down for a summons from a human. It is derogatory, they say. But I know that if this farm-world is to survive without my overseeing it, then concessions must be made. What is it you wish, Human?"

"The remaining harvest is ready for shipment. Tri Tier grows anxious for your embarkation."

Dreamer smiled down condescendingly. "You think you have won some great combat, Human. A combat with the gods. You have not." Though his voice sounded full of warning, he seemed relieved, almost jovial. "The Hvala *welcome* this planet's insistence upon self-government and its decision to assume a place in the Hvalan Dominion. Even with our different time sense we have had to delay far, far too long. Lack of mobility breeds decadence among nomads, as almost too late we have begun to realize. There are other systems to subdue. Some of us have been too long in this place."

Abruptly the god started up the stairs, taking them two at a time, awkward without arms. "But take heed, Human. Sow rebellion instead

of roshona, and we shall return. You are not wise, Third Waker, but you are compassionate . . . and lucky. Also desperate. You will not allow yourself to lose what you have gained."

He halted halfway between the landing and the darkness above, his face an interplay of light and shadow, the torchlight making his gown shimmer and sheen. "To think that while your people grew stronger, your clone progeny also did, in spite of the manipulations," he said wistfully. "We never would have guessed."

"Humankind," Third Waker said, "will have need of the upper tier . . . and of the delivery depot. Natural-born *and* clone-born will need those facilities. Knowledge of its use will save time when your people come for entertainment and your ships for the harvest."

"To save time?" Dreamer asked. "Or aid revolt?"

Third Waker squared his shoulders and spoke in a proud, sure voice. "This is your world by right of conquest, Dreamer. Your farm. Your harvest. But not your people. Those are the responsibility of myself, Third Waker of the family Lapren, and of whatever other rulers might be elected. While those who govern will change, the laws relating to our gods shall not. There will be no rebellion against the gods. Ever."

God and man gazed at one another. The silence seemed to echo.

"The upper tier shall be made available," Dreamer said at last. "And a Hvalan vote will be called concerning humankind's use of the delivery-depot unit." The pursy mouth turned up in an odd rendition of a smile. "Is this a request? Or another demand."

Peering into the upper darkness, Third Waker imagined ships orbiting—and not just Hvalan ships. He saw larders being filled, ships being refueled and refitted. Beyond, the sun that was the one true God was a bright blossom. "A request," he said. Then, under his breath, "For now." ♦

The Only Gift a Portion of Thyself

Terry McGarry

A lot of the writers in this field are also editors. Terry McGarry is a member of the somewhat smaller group of editors who are also writers. She works full-time for The New Yorker and part-time for three New York publishing houses, and still finds time to turn out her own fiction. Terry has sold eight stories (including this one) in the last three years to various magazines and anthologies; she has published one novel and is—of course—working on another.

Without giving away anything critical, we can say that "The Only Gift" is a love story. (That much you might have figured from the title.) The theme is as old as the art of storytelling, but the ideas here are as fresh as tomorrow's technology.

Some people came in here to hack off limbs, to excise eyeballs, to inflict pain and revel in gore. Some people came in for unprotected sex. Some people dropped in for a smoke. I liked them the best, the way they inflated with pleasure as they took that first drag. I watched them closely. I wondered if that's how I would look, taking my first lungful of air.

None of them knew I was here. The ones I tagged as aberrant received an obligatory-therapy notice and were, as far as I could tell from what I monitored, none the wiser. The exhibitionists who came in looking for an audience created one for themselves—and there were times, after you'd seen enough pathetic Hamlets and horrendous standup comics, when you wished you had a choice.

Choices are a concept very new to me.

She had never come in before. I'd heard theories, expressed by subjects

in other projection scenarios, that there could be people like her, people who didn't need it. They had enough outside to fulfill them; they couldn't wish for anything more. Some of them thought it was psychologically or morally dangerous to have a place where you could do anything you wanted to with no repercussions. Perhaps they would be comforted if they knew of my presence. She was certainly surprised to find me; but she was far less surprised at that than I was to find that she could see me. It was not supposed to work that way.

She came in on an assignment from college, and she clearly resented it. A lot of schools required interspace as a creative exercise, to be saved to disk and handed in. Her assignment, she had informed the system, was to experience what it would be like to be a woman traveling west on the Oregon Trail in the 19th century. A pale-skinned brunette, she was sitting on a crate in a Conestoga wagon, groaning, her stomach upset from the jolting.

"This is stupid," she said, to no one, knowing that her teacher would hear it when it was played back in vicarity mode. "I hereby lodge my complaint at this double-checking of my imagination. I described all of this perfectly clearly in my paper. To require me to use interspace to live the experience so that my professor can see me doing it is redundant and invasive."

She looked toward the front of the wagon, and her eyes widened, though there was nothing there but the piled and wrapped belongings of the projected interspace family moving from Independence, Missouri, to the American northwest.

"Who are you?" she said, and I realized that she was looking not just in the direction of my virtual perspective, but *at me*. "You're not part of the simulation."

It was not in my programming to be interactive. I didn't think I could generate speech.

"You look like a ghost, all see-through, diaphanous. I didn't know interspace was haunted, unless you programmed a scary experience."

A ghost. A good characterization. The ghost of your conscience; the conscience of the directorate, who used the interspace system to diagnose the sick and dangerous before a crime could be committed. The ghost of a personality who had never existed. That was me, all right.

"Can't you talk to me?" she said. "Has no one ever seen you before? You look so amazed." She scrunched around awkwardly on the crate, toward me. "Have you come from some other program, by accident?"

If I appeared to have a body, it followed that I would have a head to shake, so I tried the gesture. It worked. Being an observer for so long, I must have conceived of myself as having a human-looking body all this time and never been aware of it.

"What is your name?" she asked.

The most basic of questions. Most creatures with an ego, with self-awareness and the language to express it, have a name, some way of indicating themselves. "No," I said, and blinked at the sound of my own voice, a thin tenor. I could blink. I had eyes. I had a tenor voice; I was male. I tried to look down at myself, to see this body I hadn't known existed, but I saw only the crates and tarps, felt the familiar shift of perspective I was able to make at will.

"Wow!" she said. "You must like to imagine flying, if you can float around like that."

"I . . . didn't know I was," I said, and immediately felt a pang of anxiety. I was not supposed to talk to them.

"You look so confused, and sad." She got up, clinging to the frame of the wagon's top, and took a few halting steps toward me. Her face, heart-shaped, petite, surrounded by an effervescence of black curls, filled my field of view. Her hand came out, moved forward.

She flinched. "Okay, all right, don't be afraid. I won't touch you if it bothers you."

"I'm sorry," I said. I must have appeared to shrink back. "I am . . . confused, as you say. Please tell me . . . what do you see?"

"A handsome young sandy-haired man. Blue eyes. You're cute. Maybe I imagined you myself; you'd be just my type, outside. You have a kind, sad expression, and beautiful hands, very thin and delicate, an artist's hands. . . . Did I dream you up?"

"No. I live here." I shouldn't tell her this. I would be wiped, tagged as aberrant the same way I tagged the subjects. . . .

But nothing changed. Perhaps the system was not registering this interaction.

"You're not supposed to know I'm here." I was talking very fast. Her face was relaxed, mildly surprised but interested, encouraging. "No one has ever seen me before. I'm not part of the projection. I supervise to ensure nothing goes wrong."

She either made a deductive leap, or saw some sign of deceit on my face, for she said, "If you were just a diagnostic program, you wouldn't be sentient. They don't use AIs for maintenance. What do you really do? Do you watch us in here, report on us when we're bad?"

I tried a nod this time. Still the system did not respond. There was no one here except for me, and her, and the projections around us, which were going along on their preprogrammed route.

"But what use is that?" she asked. "Interspace lets people let off steam without hurting anything in the real world. The whole point is that you can do anything you want."

I found that I could sigh—that I wanted to sigh, not merely simulate

a subject sighing in response to the correct stimulus. "That isn't always enough. I have a list of things to look for, to tell when someone is liable to repeat their behavior outside. Frustration at unfulfillment; dissociation, insanity; sadism—"

She cut off what would have been a long list. "And when you find one of those people?"

I didn't answer.

"All my life," she went on, "I've believed that the reason interspace wiped out crime was because it gave an outlet. After world peace was achieved, after economic parity was established, there was no reason to rob or rape or kill except perverse desire . . . and you could do those things here without being punished, so there was no reason to do them outside." She placed her fingertips against her temples. "But that isn't the whole story, is it? . . ."

The wagon jolted to a halt; I couldn't feel it myself, but I observed the effect on her.

"Maisie?" yelled someone from up front—her brother in the simulation, who had been driving the ox team. "Time to set up for supper, Maisie."

She looked at me. "I could stop the program now. Where would you go if I did?"

I paused, not knowing the answer. "Just a place. A waiting place, until another program is activated."

"Are there others of you?"

"The system is constantly in use worldwide."

"How will I find you again?"

"Perhaps you won't." An abyss of regret opened at the idea. "Perhaps you'll see one of my analogues."

"I'll call you Glowrie," she said, "for the Glowrie Ghost in that old twovie *The Ghost Goes West*." She waited for me to react to her humor, and I effected a smile. "If I see another one of you, I'll ask if it's Glowrie, and only you will know to say yes."

"You said you didn't like interspace. You would have to keep using it to contact me again."

"I'll just set blank parameters, like a waiting room, somewhere we won't be disturbed, where we can talk."

"I'll be gone by then. When your professor screens this disk—"

The brother projection banged on the outside of the wagon. "Maisie? Come on along now, girl, the team's unhitched, I'm starved."

"I'll be right there, Abe," she called, scrunching up her face at her response to the illusion, and then said, "I'll purge it, ask to do it over. Then no one will ever know. I can't just leave you alone in here."

I thought about that. She had done me a disservice, in seeing me, in

registering me. It had never occurred to me that I was alone in here. But I was, and nothing could change that—or my awareness of it—now. I might be better off wiped. But I didn't want to be wiped. Now, I wanted very badly to stay alive.

At last I nodded. "All right," I said. Then, before she could stop the program, I said, "Is your name Maisie?"

She smiled. "No, that's just the persona. My name is Emma. Good-bye, Glowrie. I'll see you soon." She winked, gave a small wave, and then said, "System, abort"—and I was in blackness, a gray-black emptiness I had never registered as gray-black, never having considered sensory stimuli before at all.

Almost immediately I was transferred to a man's fantasy. He came into a room to find a woman tied to an old-fashioned four-poster bed. He pulled off her clothes and entered her. There was nothing to tag; he didn't cut her, or hit her.

I had observed, impartially, countless scenes of rape, murder, torture. I tagged them and went on, unaffected. But this time I was affected. She was only a projection, true. Binary code translated into a virtual reality. But so was I. And she looked like Emma. . . .

She was begging him to stop, not an unusual feature in a male-fantasy sequence. I leaned over the bed and looked into her face. "Can you see me? Can you hear me?" I said. She didn't react. She couldn't feel anything, not really . . . not like me. . . .

He didn't react, either. I wondered what was different about Emma, why she had been able to sense me. Some human esper capacity, perhaps? Some extra sensitivity?

It seemed to take forever for the simulation to end. I had never had a concept of subjective time before, when the system chronometer was all I perceived; now the endlessness was painful, the repetition of this act. And I could not stop seeing Emma's face on the woman. At last the subject terminated the program, and I was back in the blessed gray-black nothingness of the waiting area. I wanted to rest, to think, but again I was transferred to a new scenario.

This one was pleasant, the subject experiencing what it would be like to be an Olympic athlete. I started to keep track as the scenarios flashed by; I kept tabs on how many were harmless, and how many were horrifying. I expected them to be weighted toward the latter, but to my surprise the numbers were equal. I also expected a diagnostic to be triggered by this keeping track; I was using storage space to remember, something I'd never done much of before, and I lived in fear of being purged. But apparently it was accepted that the monitor programs would use up thinking space.

I wanted to know why I was suddenly capable of feeling revulsion

for sadistic and criminal fantasies. Why I was capable of feeling rage at having to witness them. I wanted to know if I was intrinsically male, or if Emma had projected maleness onto me because she was female. Most of all, I wanted to know whether I had always had the potential for emotional awareness, or if she had somehow created me, impressed some of herself into me.

I missed her. I feared that she would never reappear. I wondered how long I would live. As long as the system was maintained, I supposed. I just wanted to see Emma one more time before the end.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that when I found myself in a plain room, looking at Emma sitting in a chair, I could barely believe it. Her look of pleasure, the way her face lit up when she saw me, was beautiful.

"Hi, Glowrie," she said.

"Hello, Emma," I replied. "How did you know it was me?"

She shrugged. "I haven't seen any other beings like you. I've come and sat in this room about thirty times and never seen a thing. I've been afraid to call out to you; I'm afraid to alert the system. So when you don't show up in five minutes, I just leave and try again. It's taken me all afternoon."

Why was I the only monitor she could see? There had been one present each time she entered this room. "I think," I said slowly, "that you made me, somehow. Out of your own imagination. Maybe because you were angry at being in the simulation. I existed before; I remember existing. But I think you gave me a body, and a . . . I don't know, something else I didn't have before. Compassion. Something."

She smiled. "Well, you're Glowrie now; it's too late to call you Galatea, and anyway she was female."

We talked for a while, about my experiences, about what was different since we'd met. I told her I knew she had a life outside, and that I wouldn't expect her to spend much time with me, but that it would be nice to look forward to a visit now and then. I told her I'd missed her.

"I missed you, too," she said. "Maybe I did create you in the image I most like, because I feel very drawn to you, more than to anyone outside. I don't suppose it's healthy, but I don't really care."

It wasn't healthy; even I knew that. "You should go back. You're real. Go live your life."

She reached out again, as if to soothe me. "You look so pained by the idea. It's sweet of you to worry for me."

This time I didn't shrink away; I leaned toward her hand. But I never felt it. I looked down, and saw her hand outstretched immediately below me. When I looked up, her expression flickered through surprise and discomfort to disappointment.

"I'm almost at the end of the time I set aside," she said quietly, after a moment. "But I'd like to keep talking to you, at least. I'll be back, Glowrie. . . ." Before I could cry out to her to stay, not to cut me off, she had aborted.

I agonized through scenario after scenario, finding it terribly difficult to concentrate on what I was witnessing. Then she did come back, at last.

"I've been doing research," she said, without preamble. "It seems that other people have seen ghosts in here, the first time they come into interspace. All of those people had strong psi powers, were adults the first time they tried interspace, and weren't using the system voluntarily; they were always required to do it by jobs or tests or school, like me. No one has ever reported connecting with a monitor, but maybe they did and didn't tell anyone. All of the others had good family relationships. But I don't. I was lonely when I came here. I guess maybe we needed each other," she concluded.

"The system works by tapping into your memories," I said. "That's how it knows how people look and sound and feel to you."

"Yes," she said, regarding me fondly. "And somehow you were born out of that function."

She would visit me every couple of days, setting up scenarios where we could walk through wooded glens side by side, or drift on buoyant lakes, or sail through clouds on feather-down gliders. It was all for her; for me there was only the half-sense of a body I could never fully enjoy. But I loved her company. I loved her stories of the outside, though they made me ache for what I could never share with her; in return I told her everything I knew about the system, about myself, embarrassed at how little there seemed to be to tell.

Then she finished her education, got her degree, and her life began to change drastically. She told me she would have to make a career for herself, and wouldn't be able to see me anymore. Before she left, she did tell me that she loved me—and from as much as I understood of yearning and joy and peaceful companionship, I knew I loved her also.

The man and woman on the bed were kissing deeply, their bodies sinuous mounds under silk sheets. This would be a gentle projection, requiring little of my attention, leaving me free to dream of Emma. (I didn't want to give it much attention; I didn't want to feel envy of the virtual passion they shared.) Then the woman, who had been on top, rolled to the side of the man, twining her hand in his sandy hair, and I saw her face.

Emma's face.

"Glowrie," she murmured as she caressed him. I almost answered be-

fore I recalled her descriptions of my appearance. The projection male was a projection of me. "I wish it could always be like it is now. . . ."

"Let me make it true for you," my voice said as his full lips moved, and they kissed again, open-mouthed, as if trying to consume each other. He rolled on top of her, and his back arched so that the top sheet slipped away as he slid into her—

Her eyes, half-shut in ecstasy, focused on me, opened. She pushed at his shoulders and he pulled up, braced on his elbows. "System," she began, as if to abort. Then she said, "No, I'm sorry, wait, I don't want to run from you—Glowrie—"

The projection appeared completely confused. "Run from what?" he said. "I'm right here, my love, I'm—"

"No, get off me," she said, pushing at him again, and he rolled away and sat up, frowning as her eyes stayed locked on me.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you staring at?"

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Just stay quiet for a moment, please; whatever I say or do, be quiet." Then she looked at me again and said, "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" my projection and I said simultaneously; but he was baffled, and I was bitterly sarcastic.

I wanted to scream as she hushed him again, her hand on his shoulder, communicating through touch. "For betraying me with myself? How can I be jealous? Except, of course, that he can do for you everything I can't, and probably everything I can as well—"

"No, not *everything* you can. It's never enough, it's never the same, I can't program him to be you, to have your unpredictable reactions, your *youness*, not really. . . ."

Never enough, *never* the same? How many of these scenarios had she run? Rage filled me; I didn't know how I contained it.

"Why not?" I snapped. "People do it every day. Every day they come in here to be with dead loved ones, to sleep with movie stars, with the lovers who spurned them. Who needs reality? You don't need me. *I'm not even real!*" I was shouting. I didn't want to shout at her; her face showed hurt, the threat of tears, and I didn't know how I could be so enraged at her and at the same time feel such anguish at causing her pain.

"Don't do this," she said sharply. "Damn it, try to understand how much I wanted you—"

"You don't know what you want. You didn't create me; you only created a hell for me to be aware of."

I wanted to leave her then, but I couldn't abort the scenario. Only she could do that.

Her body seemed to sag. "I should never have risked this. I should

have known you'd show up eventually. I am so sorry. Goodbye, Glowrie—real Glowrie, one and only Glowrie."

And she terminated.

It was what I had wanted her to do, to release me—but when she did it, I felt betrayed all over again, because she'd never walked out on me before. The moment I spent, stunned, enraged, in the between-place was the longest moment of my existence.

I wanted to terminate myself, but I didn't have the means.

Years passed, outside; for me it was eons, the eons that must pass in a place like Hell, for those souls damned to eternal pain of the sort I saw in the fantasies of a Satanist and a minister. The anger faded, over time, and eventually so did the stabbing recollection of betrayal. They left in their wake a profound loneliness, compounded as each scenario I entered proved again, and again, and again, to be one that had no Emma in it.

In time I forgave her. Her solution to our dilemma had been understandable, and had I accepted it right away she would be visiting me still. But there was no one else I could talk to; I was doomed ever to observe, never again to participate. The years turned into decades

And then she came back, if only for one last time. I had just left a fantasy sequence set up by a girl in love with her married, much older zero-gymnastics teacher, and its poignancy had uncomfortably echoed my own loss. It was perfect timing.

"How long have you been waiting?" I asked her quietly.

"It took twelve tries," she said, from her stuffed chair in the old waiting-room scenario.

"You've come as you are?" I said, an old joke between us, referring to her appearance: she had aged past middle years, gained weight, her long black curls now cropped short and almost entirely gray.

"Yes," she answered. "I've missed you." The eyes had not changed: still dark, penetrating, regarding me as they always had—except for the hint of sadness.

"How is your life outside?"

She rubbed her upper lip, a gesture that had always signaled indecision. Then she said, "I married, three years after the last time I saw you. I haven't been back to interspace since then. I have two daughters, one grandson. He doesn't play in here, and neither do they."

I nodded, glad that I still could. I had not felt the illusion of a body since she'd gone. "I hope he's kind to you. I hope you've been happy."

She nodded back. "I have been. But I've never been able to forget you. I thought if I had a normal life . . . But you've been in my heart always, Glowrie. I'm so sorry I left you alone." At the thought, her eyes

filled with tears, seeming magnified, unfocused. "It was selfish of me. All of it."

I nodded again, knowing what she meant. "Visit me now and then," I said, aware of echoing my own long-ago words, aware of the empty existence they implied.

"I will," she said, "as long as I'm able." Pain flashed across her face.

"Mortals die," I said. "I know you fear it. But take heart; immortality isn't all it's cracked up to be."

She smiled, as I'd known she would, but tears had escaped to flow down her sagging cheeks and nestle in the folds of her lips. "Glowrie," she said, her voice gone very flat, "that's not what I meant by 'as long as I'm able.' . . . They're going to purge you."

I stared at her, speechless.

"You must hate me so already, for the pain I've caused you—all these years—"

"No," I said quickly, not to convey my forgiveness but because her self-recrimination was leading to something. I needed to find out what.

She collected herself, looked at me dead on. "I changed my major in college to interspace studies," she said. "I couldn't tell you, somehow; I thought it would seem like I was dissecting you. I learned programming, Glowrie—I learned this system top to bottom. Ironical, since I hated it, huh? But if you want to change something, you have to know it better than you know yourself. I'm on the task force that exposed the covert psychological tampering, the invasion of privacy. I couldn't tell them I'd found out about it from you; I had to do it believably, legally. . . ."

She paused to let me process this, and I said, "Won't that cause the resurgence of real crime?" The thought of what went on in here happening to corporeal beings disturbed me. I didn't really know what corporeal beings were. But I knew that Emma was one. It didn't matter that it had nothing to do with me, with my existence. Dying was something I didn't want to think about yet.

"Probably," she said. "But the mind control that prevented it was unethical. We have to find better ways of coping with the darkness inside us."

I nodded again. "How long do I have?"

"A week, roughly. I'm so, so sorry, Glowrie, my old love. I debated not telling you, to save you worrying; you'd never have known, then, it would have been quick and painless. But I love you, and you had a right to know, a right to the chance to make peace with yourself."

I thought for a moment, and then I said, "For that I thank you, Emma. But I'd like to make one final point."

She nodded, receptive, waiting.

"Isn't this murder?"

For six days on the chronometer, I thought. The scenarios ceased their endless flow, leaving me in the darkness of the in-between place. This disturbed me, because I didn't understand why they wouldn't just wipe me, why they had separated me from the system—and because without the system, I had no hope of talking to Emma. I tried to use the time to come to terms with the prospect of nonexistence.

It was horribly frightening at first, for all my former suicidal desire, for all the immortal ennui that had followed it. I wanted to scream I AM HERE, I EXIST; the intensity of my own consciousness seemed far too alive a thing to be snuffed out. At times I was merely curious: Would I have a soul, a ghost? Was my consciousness indeed something with an energy that could continue past the cessation of pulses in the circuitry that was my true body? I decided it didn't seem to matter; once nonexistent, I wouldn't be aware of nonexistence.

I resigned myself to it as best I could, and spent what time I had left replaying in my mind's eye the scenarios Emma and I had shared, and dreamed of a final scenario in which I had a body that could feel hers in its arms, just once, as I hugged her goodbye forever.

But more than a full week passed, and I was still there to register its passage. At the end of the third week, when I was frantic, never sure when it would happen, never knowing when the blow would fall, Emma popped up. This time it felt as if the scenario coalesced around me, rather than that I popped into it.

"Glowrie," she said. She was beaming.

"Before you say anything, please let me know when I'm to be shut down. I can't stand—"

"You're not," she said.

"What—" I blurted, before she cut me off.

"You're an AI, a consciousness. So are the other monitors, at whatever level. We're going to give you each permanent control of separate miniature portions of the system, leave it all on auto. Each section will be inaccessible from the outside, and from the other portions of the system. But you'll have control of your environment, just as if you were a subject. And no one will ever cut off the juice."

She was beaming, exultant. She said my comment about murder had made her think; then she'd persuaded the task force that shutting down the AIs would be unethical, since none of them had malfunctioned in any way, and she had worked up an estimate of the maintenance cost, which was really no more than an electric bill.

I thanked her, quietly, overwhelmed; and then, once I fully realized what all of it meant, I said goodbye, for I knew I would never see her again. Nor would I create a projection Emma in my new world, for it

would never have her reactions, her spirit. It would be as thin and unfulfilling as her projection of me had been. I tried not to grieve for the time we could have had if I'd just understood that from the beginning.

And so, as a world unfolded around me—a world I could smell and feel, in which I could take any form, go anywhere, be anything—I immersed myself in the joy and freedom of life. Not the half-life of my previous existence, but a 3-D, sense-filled, self-determined life.

I worried that I would get tired of playing God, creating playmates and companions, having long conversations with talking flowers and singing skies. But I knew that Emma could not have been sure that no one would ever disconnect the system; my existence would forever be at the mercy of those outside, and I doubted that, should the system break down, anyone would fix it.

That was all right, I told myself; no one should live forever. And except for missing Emma, I never did tire of my world. It seemed a natural extension of my being, something I'd earned in all those years of imprisonment inside other people's dreams.

For a long time I immersed myself in my virtual freedom. But eventually I began to think about the other AIs. We were each locked into our own separate interspace; the system was not advanced enough to admit two consciousnesses simultaneously, even AIs—and it may have been that the directorate was not willing to see what happened if we combined our intelligences.

I wondered if that could be changed, and I concentrated very hard, as if somehow I could make contact with the others by will alone. I got nowhere—although I intended to continue to try—but it did remind me of the outside, and make me realize how much time had passed while I played in my “new” world.

Twenty years had passed. Now Emma would be an ancient woman, if she was alive at all. I found myself mourning her; even denied her visits, I'd always known she *existed*, somewhere. . . .

I fashioned a gazebo in a meadow all in blue, the cobalt grass stretching away to meet an indigo sky, so that I could gaze out into the distance and let my grief take its course. Then I felt something brush my shoulder. I *felt* something!—

—And Emma, young Emma as I'd first seen her, was sitting on the bench beside me.

Reflexively I put on the body she had envisioned for me, then blushed at having done it. “Did I create you out of my grief?” I asked. “Or are you really visiting somehow?”

“Well, the former would be a neat infinite regression, since you used to claim that I'd created you.”

I smiled; that sounded like the Emma I had known. "You gave the breath of life to a shell."

She nodded and hooked her arm through mine.

"I did make you up," I said then, disappointed at the touch of her: wondrous as it was, it could only be my imagination. I wouldn't have put it past her to get in to see me, perhaps the dying wish of an elderly woman—who happened to head the task force that had put the seals on in the first place—and I realized I'd been half hoping for that all along, that she would come back, as she always had, that not even her own rules or her own death could stop her. But because I could feel her, I knew she wasn't real.

"No," she said, gazing out at the blue-tinted horizon. "But you could say that I'm a ghost. Emma's body is dead."

Despite the presence of the creature next to me, I was pierced by grief to hear that fact stated so definitively. Could this really be her ghost? Were there souls that could get into closed computer systems and haunt them?

"But I'm not. I'm a program, like you. 'The only gift is a portion of thyself,' as Emerson said. Emma had her engrams copied onto a compatible matrix, for injection here when her body died; and she left a good bit of her money in a fund for the upkeep of the system. Her ghost, I hope, is in Heaven." She looked at me at last. "But I'm Emma now."

"How did she get around the seals?"

"Because she asked to. The rest of her money went to the interspace directorate—but only in the event of their compliance with this part of her will."

I looked at her, raised my hand, ruffled her hair. The long, black curls were bouncy, soft. "You always were too clever for the system."

This was her final gift to me, after full awareness, after the reprieve of my death sentence, after this universe. She'd left me herself, as a legacy.

I pulled Emma's lithe body tight against my side, and together we conjured up a sunrise. ♦

Ideograph- Gazing

Howard Zaharoff

I took up stargazing last year and felt—still do—like James Thurber. Remember “University Days,” where he described his experiences in botany? The other students saw plant and flower cells; all Thurber could see in the microscope was the reflection of his eyes. Though he tried faking it, it was clear, to his embarrassment and his professor’s frustration, that he saw only himself.

That was my kind of experience with star charts and constellations. After months of searching I finally saw the North Star . . . which nearly made me an unbeliever: Would a God have placed in the firmament, at so critical a place, *Polaris*? That 2nd magnitude (astronomese for “2 watt”) *blip* of a star?

Further months of intense gazing passed until I finally saw Ursa Minor, the Little Dipper. (Bear in mind—no pun here—I live outside Boston, so the only time I see stars is during midsummer or midwinter brownouts.) Actually, I saw what others call the Little Dipper. To my eyes it looked neither like a bear cub nor a dipper, but more like a corn cob pipe or, at certain angles, the grin of a teenager with acne.

I spent the next three months trying to make Orion the Hunter appear in that part of the sky where I knew he hid. I could see his belt—though frankly it looked more like a dipper—and I finally spotted his sword, though from its placement and direction it looked more like . . . well, I bet

our Hunter was popular with the ladies, if you catch my drift. But Orion himself? A mighty hunter with shield and club, like you see in astronomy texts?

I could make out a vaguely globular shape, less Orion than an Onion. But in truth, I never saw the Hunter.

I felt bad, concluding that I had, in modern parlance, a Stargazer Deficit Disorder (or, as some say, I was "astrophysically challenged"). But then I realized that what one sees in the sky, unaffected by prejudice or preconception, tells us more about the observer than the observed. (For example, I recalled that I had devoured a mushroom and onion pizza the night I first spotted that predatory Onion in the Orion region.) If I'm right, and star patterns are just giant Rorschach tests, what does that tell us about the ancients who gave our constellations their names? A few thoughts. . . .

Primitive Man. Primitive man was a hunter-gatherer, gathering other hunters into a society that was largely patriarchal, a so-so start for a species. (Had primitive society been filiarchal, or child-ruled, today there would probably be more gift-giving holidays, more presweetened breakfast cereals, and more synonyms for "bowel movement.")

Patriarchal man was obsessed with his fertility. Indeed, scientists who study primitive socie-

ties' beliefs about the heavens (archaeopaleosociocosmologists) conclude that the ancients saw a night sky dominated by phallic and cryptophallic constellations, such as Banana Major (the "Big Banana"), Banana Minor (the "Little Banana"), the Northern and Southern Bananas, and such minor constellations as the Mushroom, the Dagger, the Pylon, the Candle, the Papaya, and the Summer Squash.

Matriarchal Man. Time passes. Autarchy and Patriarchy yield to Monarchy and Malarkey. The emphasis on virility diminishes since, frankly, no one but the males ever cared. In the once phallocentric heavens we now find Andromeda, Virgo, Cassiopeia. Soon new constellations with feminine overtones appear: Ursula Minor, wearing a Little Diaper; nearby Coma Berenices ("Bernice's Blackout"); distant Capricornus (the "Corn Remover"); and Mensa.

Evolving Man. Man discovers fire, the wheel, cinnamon toast. With so much to live for, his primary concern becomes avoiding dropping down in the food chain. Thus, fertility symbols give way to a sky filled with hostile creatures: lions, dragons, in-laws. Center stage is a little bear doubling as a dipper and a huge bear with a ladle on its head and shoulders, expressing a basic human need to convert predators

into nourishment (though perhaps Evolving Stargazers were simply giving vent to a desire for soup).

If my theory is right, maybe it's time modern man replaced these ancient expressions of human needs and fears with more contemporary neuroses. In other words, let's leave behind not only Primitive and Matriarchal Man, but also Classical, Romantic, Re-

naissance, Middle-Aged and, yes, even Modern (Judaeo-Goyish) Man, and assume our rightful position as Post-Modern or Aerobic-Nintendo-Zero Coupon Man.

To this end I have begun to compile a list of replacement constellations. What follows is a sample of the transformative ideography I seek. Pay heed: I promise you'll see my new constellations as easily as you see the old ones.

OLD

Auriga, the Charioteer.
 Bootes, the Herdsman.
 Cassiopeia, the Queen
 Draco, the Dragon.
 Leo, the Lion
 Taurus, the Bull
 Virgo, the Virgin
 The Northern Cross
 The Southern Cross.

NEW

Oreo, the Cream-Filled Cookie
 Booties, the Footwear
 Casper, the Ghost
 Zorro, the Swordsman
 Lotus, the Spreadsheet
 Zenith, the Most Trusted Name
 in Electronics
 Jacuzzi, the Hot Tub
 The Tire Iron
 The Bite Plate

Armed with this new stellar mythos, more people may be inspired to study the sky, more children aspire to become astronauts, more students enroll in courses in space science.

All of which should lead, one

hopes, to mega-sales for my new, copyrighted star charts. And that, after all, is what being Aerobic-Nintendo-Zero Coupon Man is all about. ♦

A Fifth Force, and Other Anomalies That Weren't

Stephen L. Gillett

Most people who follow science fiction have heard of the four fundamental forces in the Universe: electromagnetism, gravity, the weak nuclear force, and the strong nuclear force. Gravity and electricity, of course, we deal with on a daily basis: chemical and frictional forces, for example, are fundamentally due to the electrical interactions between atoms. The strong and weak forces are important only on the scale of an atomic nucleus. The strong force holds nuclei together, while the weak force allows certain kinds of radioactive decay.

But is there anything else?

Well, maybe, but we have no evidence at this point. For a while, though, it seemed so: a couple of groups of researchers thought

they'd found evidence of a short-range force opposing gravity.

One group reanalyzed a classic set of experiments that directly measured the gravitational force between two objects in the laboratory. It seemed the force between them depended slightly on the composition of the objects, as well as their mass. The obvious way to explain this would be that another force, besides gravity, is present. That force would depend on the proportions of different atomic particles in the masses. In particular, the force seemed sensitive to the amount of "baryons" (protons and neutrons) present, as though it affected them only.

About the same time, another group, analyzing geophysical data from deep boreholes, thought

they'd found a systematic difference in *g*, the gravitational acceleration at the surface of the Earth. When they accounted as best they could for the gravity of the surrounding rocks, the *g* value seemed to be slightly but systematically larger than expected in the holes. This also fitted, because in surface experiments a weak, short-range, unknown repelling force would cancel gravity out slightly, whereas *inside* the Earth it would cancel itself out.

Subsequent research, however, hasn't supported either of these results. Many other investigators, besides the original ones, have since carried out many other experiments, not just in university laboratories but in situations where a new force should be easiest to detect: on towers, in boreholes through both icecap and rock, beside cliffs, and on mountain slopes. No one has found any evidence of new forces.

In particular, the anomalies in gravitational acceleration near the Earth's surface, whether on towers or in boreholes, proved to be due to minute but unaccounted-for variations in mass distribution in the underlying rocks. Which came as no surprise: as one who's worked extensively in geophysics, I (and many others) had been skeptical of the geophysical results. The Earth is complex and heterogeneous, and it's extremely difficult to account for

all those complexities when you're trying to isolate a very small effect. And that turned out to be exactly the problem.

All this effort, at least, had the good effect that the experimental results got much better. If there *is* a fifth force, we can say much more precisely how strong it can be, and over what ranges.

This was not before, however, a number of theoreticians had published some ad hoc justifications about how such a fifth force might fit into current notions of supergravity, a unified field theory, and other sorts of glamorous and gee-whizzy stuff on the cutting edge of theoretical physics.

Now, the theoreticians weren't completely off the wall. Physicists strongly suspect that the so-called Standard Model, which incorporates electromagnetism and the nuclear forces with quantum mechanics, must be incomplete. For one thing, there's no room for gravity in the Standard Model, and several possible avenues for incorporating gravity into quantum mechanics lead to other macroscopic forces as well. "Superstring" theory, which is currently one popular approach to a "TOE" (theory of everything), is an example.

In fact, speculation about possible new macroscopic forces goes back almost forty years: some physicists had suggested, in particular, that the observed "conservation of baryon number" could be explained by a "symme-

try" that was expressed as a new force. ("Conservation of baryon number" refers to the fact that the total of protons and neutrons is not affected by most nuclear reactions, although they can be converted into each other.)

So, it seems there's lots of room for other "interactions"—but the nature, strength, and so on of these forces is so *underconstrained* that the speculations aren't too useful till there's some Real Live Data to work with!

Thus the theoreticians' haste was somewhat unseemly. You *really* ought to make sure a phenomenon's real before you go to explain it. So why did scientists chase after what turned out to be a will-o-the-wisp? You're not supposed to go off half-cocked when you use the scientific method!

But scientists are human, too; and they have bills to pay and groceries to buy just like everyone else. Discovering something *really* new, like a fifth force, would be the ticket to fame and fortune. If nothing else, your scientific career would be assured; you'd have no problem thereafter in getting funding to do whatever research you like! And that's especially a consideration these days, with research funds so tight. (Alternatively, there might be patent rights. . . .)

You often hear that scientists aren't open to new ideas. But that's nonsense. Every scientist would *love* to discover a new idea, and the newer or more

glamorous, the better. It's an *excellent* career move!

The catch is that the new idea must be right. Sheer novelty counts for nothing; ideas, *per se*, are a dime a dozen. The idea not only has to explain new observations, it also has to explain the *old* observations as well, as least as well as the old theories did. That is, your new idea has to do a better job of explaining reality than current ideas. Just wishful thinking won't do it; it has to stand up to the hardest tests your skeptical colleagues can devise.

For other scientists are going to scrutinize your new notion, test it in all the ways they can think of, pursue its implications and check them experimentally. (And if your feelings get hurt because people are being skeptical of your brilliant new theory . . . well, you've got a lot to learn about the real-world workings of science. As a President once said, if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.)

As for patent rights: you think scientists are hard-nosed, try venture capitalists sometime. They expect an idea to work, without excuses. Which is why I've always been amused by vehement claims for the reality of "psi" forces, usually accompanied by a naive blast at those oh-so-skeptical scientists—as in some remarkably silly articles in SF magazines over the years. Hey, guys: if it's that good, why bother with validation from the scientific com-

munity? Go get some venture capital, and make a *lot* of money. Heck, if the scientific community *does* validate it, and publishes something in the formal scientific literature, you'll just compromise any possible patents.

The venture types will give you a hearing if it looks good. But they're going to check it out *very* thoroughly. And they won't sit still for excuses about (say) psi powers being "shy" when skeptics are around, or some such nonsense. (People get that way when they're talking about investing large quantities of money, especially if it's *their* money.)

But if the new idea *does* stand up to experimental investigation: then fame, fortune—and funding!—are yours. So there are great rewards indeed for new ideas.

In fact, because research funding is low, more scientists are tempted to go public prematurely with preliminary, but glamorous, results. "Shooting from the hip" is becoming a big problem—at least bigger than it used to be.

Look at the cold-fusion flap a few years ago, for example. Two electrochemists from the University of Utah had intriguing preliminary data from a bright idea that was worth checking out. They went public prematurely, though, with grandiose claims that simply didn't prove out—but not till a lot of shouting and wasted effort ensued.

Lots of people immediately scrambled to try to reproduce

the claims, which is as it should be. But again the theoreticians came out of the woodwork to explain the results before the phenomenon had been verified at all! This was premature: cold fusion was so far out of everything that was already known about fusion, and about nuclear reactions generally, that one scientist (Huizenga, 1992) has called them "one-miracle, two-miracle, or three-miracle" hypotheses.

Now, sure, something's simply being far out doesn't prove it couldn't have happened. Far-out things that nonetheless were real have happened before. But it's most cost-effective to make sure a far-out phenomenon's *real* before you try to explain it.

(By the way, the notion that work in cold fusion was a matter of "chemists" vs. "physicists" was largely a media invention. It made good copy, but in fact the ad hoc teams that formed spontaneously to check—and hopefully, to extend—the cold-fusion claims consisted of electrochemists and nuclear physicists. "Interdisciplinary" study is a big buzzword now, and cold fusion was no exception. The original cold-fusion investigators, in fact, got in trouble partly because they were using complicated, specialized instruments without expertise in them, so that readings that they thought indicated nuclear reactions were just background or "noise." Handling state-of-the-art machines can be tricky.)

"Science by press release" is not science at all. Don't believe *anything* that's released to the media first.

Why do scientists insist on formal publication in a scientific journal? It's a B.S. filter, a procedure to help winnow out the nonsense, and to identify holes and oversights in the experimental work. And, even more important, formal publication gets out enough information on the new findings, and how they were obtained, that other scientists can try to build on them. That's the ultimate nonsense filter, in fact: if it doesn't work, it gets tossed out! (See my article "The Scientific Literature" in the March 1985 issue of AMAZING® Stories.)

Another current problem is the counterpart to the temptation to do "media science": lots of the *unglamorous* grunt work isn't getting done. All the fundamental glamorous discoveries ever made have relied on a base of unglamorously gotten hard data. Consider Kepler's laws of planetary motion, which couldn't be justified without a data base like the one Tycho Brahe developed: thousands upon thousands of painstaking measurements of the planets' positions, taken over a period of years. And in turn, Kepler's laws led to Newton's laws of gravitation.

For a more recent example, the plate-tectonics revolution in the Earth sciences could not have occurred without vast amounts

of new data, much from oceanography and seismology, gathered by an army of unsung scientists and technicians. In my own field of earth science, "grunt work" that isn't happening any more is just general geologic mapping—the recording of geologic structures and rock types in a particular area. Not only is this a necessary base for any future "mega-thinking," such data are vital for such things as environmental or resource studies.

There's no glory—and more important, no funding—right now in just gathering good data. Instead, there's a temptation to skip right to the possibly glamorous outcomes, even if you don't yet have the data to support them.

In fact, the scientific journals are tending to encourage such "half-cocked" science. It's hard to get a paper published, at least in the Important Journals, if it's just a collection of good data. You have to add a section on the "possible implications"—the more glamorous and glitzy, the better—even if your data really don't justify them.

So, as with cold fusion, the fifth force just didn't stand up to further investigation.

Disappointing? Maybe. But reality is what it is, not what we want it to be. Pretending a new force is there when it's not will not lead anywhere; not to any new insights, and most certainly to no new technology! Wishful

thinking just isn't a useful world-view.

But of course, there may yet be a fifth force. Not just vague theoretical speculation, but new experimental data, may yet compel one. Even some form of cold fusion might be suggested someday by new data.

And who knows? The experimental data may be confirmed and extended. At which point we can then speculate about technology, with some hope of seeing the technology become reality.

References:

Close, Frank, *Too Hot to Handle*, Princeton University Press, 1991.

Huizenga, John R., *Cold Fusion: The Scientific Fiasco of the Century*, University of Rochester Press, 1992.

A couple of in-depth examinations of the cold-fusion flap. The first mentioned is the more popular treatment. ♦

Metamorphosis

Mike Resnick

This is the opening section of Mike Resnick's forthcoming novel, "A Miracle of Rare Design: A Tragedy of Transcendence," which will be published in hardcover this December by Tor Books.

Mike has won two Hugo awards, and has been nominated for 9 Hugos and 5 Nebulas since 1989.

1

Xavier William Lennox shuffled down the narrow, twisting street, trying to mimic the awkward walk of the Fireflies. He breathed in the pungent odors of decaying food, felt a slight burning sensation in his nostrils, and tried to ignore it.

He checked the sky. The huge yellow sun wouldn't set for another two hours, even though a trio of moons were already dancing above the horizon. That meant he'd have to stay here for at least another hour before making his final approach to the pyramid.

He looked around. Three Fireflies were standing outside the triangular doorway of a mud building, lost in conversation. They were wrapped in colorful robes, totally oblivious to the heat that was sapping Lennox's strength by the minute. He tried to hear what they were saying, but he was too far away, and he didn't dare move any closer: the last thing he needed was for some overly friendly Firefly to ask him to join them.

A Firefly infant, no more than two years old, toddled up to him, total-

ly nude, his golden skin reflecting the sunlight, his tiny vestigial wings flapping furiously to no good purpose. Lennox looked away from the child, hoping that it would lose interest in him and wander off.

Suddenly it tugged at his robe.

"*Bebu?*" it asked. "*Bebu?*"

"I'm not your *bebu*," replied Lennox, grateful that a toddler wouldn't be able to spot his accent as the alien words rolled uncomfortably off his tongue. "Go home."

"*Bebu?*" repeated the infant.

Lennox looked around to make sure no one was watching him, then slowly lifted his arms and dropped them. It was a sign of aggression in the fierce, carnivorous avians, now almost extinct, that for eons had preyed upon the Fireflies. The infant instinctively recoiled at the gesture, then raced into an angular mud house. It would be, Lennox knew, a typical Firefly dwelling with no windows, crazy angles, and a high ceiling covered with their incomprehensible religious symbols.

A moment later the infant's mother stuck her head out of the doorway, looking at Lennox as the child pointed in his direction. After glaring at him for what she considered a sufficient length of time, she disappeared back inside the house, and Lennox released his grip on the pistol he had hidden beneath his flowing robes.

A bead of sweat trickled down his face, ran along his upper lip, and made its way into his mouth. Then another, and another, and suddenly he realized that he was thirsty. More than thirsty; he was in serious danger of dehydration. The thought infuriated him. He had spent so long training his body for this day that he felt betrayed by it. For reasons he could not comprehend, for all oxygen-breathers needed water and Medina was a sweltering hellhole, the Fireflies drank—sipped, really—only at sunrise and sunset. Now he would have to risk exposure by giving his body the water it craved while the sun was still high in the sky.

He slowly shuffled down the street, peering casually into the interior of each building he passed. Every one of them was occupied, and the thought of having to wait for water made him lust for it even more.

Finally he reached the end of the street and found himself confronted by five more crazily winding thoroughfares, all narrow, all crowded with angular buildings that made little or no sense. He bore to the right, not out of any belief that he was more likely to find an empty domicile there, but simply so he could find his way back, and again began inspecting each structure as he walked by. Fireflies of both sexes and all sizes stared out at him, neither speaking nor showing any interest.

Maybe it's even hot for them, he thought as he continued. About halfway down the street he came to a stable—the least likely place to put it, so of course that's where it was located—and stepped inside,

grateful to be out of the sun despite the alien smells. There were ten stalls—seven on the left, three on the right, all irregularly shaped—and he walked slowly down the aisle between them, half-expecting to be stopped with every step he took.

But nobody was there to stop him, and he found that two of the stalls were empty. Trying to ignore the soft bleats of the shaggy, incredibly ugly beasts of burden—"They make old Earth's wildebeest look like creatures of grace and beauty," Fallico had remarked during their first visit to Medina—he entered a stall, sat in a corner below eye level of anyone passing by, quickly removed his canteen, and greedily poured half of its contents down his throat before pausing for breath.

He sat still for a moment, reveling in the relief from sun and thirst, then drained the canteen and walked over to the stall's water trough to refill it. The trough was empty.

He walked cautiously into the aisle and inspected all the other troughs. Evidently the beasts kept to the same schedule as their masters; there wasn't a drop of water to be had.

Lennox returned to the empty stall, buried the canteen beneath the bedding, and walked back out the way he had come. As he was about to leave the stable, he saw a pair of Fireflies approaching him. His first inclination was to duck back inside, but he quickly decided that was more likely to draw attention than simply walking down the street, swathed in his robes, acting as if he belonged there. His mind made up, he began walking directly toward the Fireflies, staring at the ground, circling around them without missing a step. They passed by silently, without giving him a second glance.

He smelled the odors of alien cooking. Good. The Fireflies were preparing for the evening meal. That meant the sun had to set pretty soon. The temperature would drop forty degrees or more in the next hour, and he could finally stop worrying about passing out from heatstroke.

Suddenly he became aware of a damp feeling in his armpits. *Damn!* Despite all his precautions, his salt pills, his adrenaline injections, the oxygenation of his blood, his anti-perspirants, his loosely fitting robes, he had begun sweating in earnest. Perspiration was pouring off his body. How much longer before the stains were visible? More to the point, did Fireflies ever sweat? There was so much he didn't know about them; who would ever have thought that he might get tripped up by something so trivial as perspiration?

He stepped into a recessed doorway while he considered his options, and finally concluded that he didn't really have any. He hadn't come this far to quit, and he had no way of masking any stains if they should come through, so he might as well not worry about them. If he held his body awkwardly, if he looked like he was trying to hide something, he'd

draw more attention than if he simply walked boldly and confidently among the Fireflies. Possibly, if no one was observing him, he could cover his robes with a layer of dust, as if he had just come out of the desert, but the desert was red and the dust of the city streets was brown; it might call even more attention to himself.

The best alternative was to return to the stable and wait there until the sun set the rest of the way. He was just about to do so when a caravan of Fireflies and their beasts of burden passed by, laden with exotic goods. There was a chance that there was another stable further up the road, that their animals would be quartered there, but it wasn't worth the risk of exposure if he guessed wrong.

A small insect landed on his cheek, and he instinctively slapped at it. One of the Fireflies, sitting atop its ugly mount, turned to stare at him.

What now? thought Lennox. *Didn't any of you ever take a swipe at a bug before?* And then he tried to remember: had *he* ever seen a Firefly react to an insect? He couldn't recall a single instance.

The Firefly was still staring at him, and he felt the need to do something, *anything*, to assuage what he was sure were its suspicions. He considered everything from faking a fit to eating the insect, and settled, uncomfortably, for meticulously readjusting the thick hood of his robe. He dared a quick look in the direction of the Firefly; evidently it had lost interest in him, and was once again staring dully at the street.

Still, just to be on the safe side, he began walking again, turning into the first side street he came to. It seemed to be a row of hovels housing weavers. There were great vats of dye, and large hanks of colorful yarn hanging out to dry. Here were the reds and oranges of the desert tribes, the muted browns and greens of the city dwellers, even the whites of the warrior caste and the golds of the priests. Firefly females sat at their looms, their fingers moving swiftly and surely, creating subtle patterns, while dozens of children played in the street. A small, feline creature emerged from a house and began walking across the street. One of the children threw a rock at it; it snarled and raced back inside.

As Lennox walked down the street, ignoring the children and ignored in turn by them, he saw an occasional water gourd hanging near a loom, and tried not to think about it. There was no way he could steal one without being noticed, not in an area as crowded as this. This led him to wonder if he was still sweating, then to lick his upper lip to find out. It was moist and salty. Were any sweat stains visible? He didn't know, and had no way to check on them, but the children continued to pay him no attention, so he assumed his outer robes were still dry.

He looked at a pair of male children chasing each other up the street. How the hell did they do it? Their metabolism couldn't be that different, not living as they did on an oxygen world that was capable of sup-

porting human life. But they didn't sweat, they didn't drool, they didn't pant, they didn't give any indication that the heat affected them at all. Evolution and adaptation, he told himself, evolution and adaptation. But that didn't explain the wings. They couldn't fly—given their structures, they had *never* flown—so what were the wings for? And their fingers—why were they so long? How did useless wings and four-jointed fingers qualify as survival traits?

I should have done more homework.

But, of course, that was precisely what he was doing *now*. The Fireflies had no use for Men. They refused to trade with them. They refused to exchange ambassadors. They refused to have anything to do with Man's sprawling Republic. They allowed Men one small outpost, right in the middle of that sun-baked southern desert known as Hell's Oven, but no Man was allowed access to their cities. Indeed, it was a minor miracle that Lennox had managed to learn their language, since there were no radio or video signals to study and analyze; he had accomplished it by being incarcerated with a Firefly who had killed four Men, and he had to fight for his life perhaps fifty times before the Firefly was willing to declare a truce and begin trying to converse with him. Even now, as he tried to pass for a Firefly and make his way to the pyramid, he was totally ignorant of the meaning behind the crude squiggles that passed for the Fireflies' written language.

The spoken language wasn't much better. Simplistic and crude, and grating to the ear—but there was a certain poetry to it when translated back into Terran. The Fireflies' name for Medina was Grotanama, which meant "Touched by God," while the city in which he found himself, Brakkanan, was, literally, "Gold at Day's End." There were some fifty-odd dialects just in this hemisphere, but fortunately the language he had learned from his cellmate was a bastard tongue that had become the *lingua franca* for thousands of miles in every direction.

A trio of flying insects began buzzing around his face. He tried to ignore them, and they were joined by half a dozen more.

It must be the salt, he decided. Now that he was prepared, he could control his reactions—but none of the Fireflies were being bothered by insects, and if he drew enough of them, someone would start wondering why.

He continued walking until he was well past the children, then turned a corner, surreptitiously ran his hand over the front of a filthy building, and covered his face with dirt and grime, hoping that it would mask the odor of his perspiration from the insects. He gave no thought to how it would affect his appearance; if any Firefly actually saw his face, clean or dirty, he was a dead man anyway.

The shadows began lengthening as the sun plummeted down behind

the distant hills, and Lennox began to think he actually had a chance of accomplishing his goal. The temperature began dropping precipitously. It was still hot, and it would remain hot, but he no longer felt like he was in danger of melting. He hadn't lost his craving for water, but somehow, with the coming of the darkness, he was able to control it.

He considered approaching the pyramid. The streets were emptying, and he would have a clear path, unhindered by any Fireflies. But the very act of walking there alone would call too much attention to himself, and he had no idea what was expected of him once he arrived, so he kept to the shadows, hoping to remain unseen, and planning to fall in behind the first group of Fireflies who emerged from their dwellings to begin the mile-long trek.

He would have liked to simply squat down, his back propped against a wall, and feign sleep for the next hour, but he had no idea if Fireflies slept in such positions—the Firefly he had been incarcerated with hadn't seemed to sleep at all—and he decided not to risk it. But the sudden silence and the lack of movement convinced him that they also didn't walk around after dark, at least not until they went to the pyramid, so he simply stood in the shadows, motionless, and hoped that no one would see him.

Five minutes passed, then ten more—and then a lone Firefly came walking down the narrow street. Lennox stood still, trying to hide the tension in his body, and hoping to strike an attitude that implied that of course this was where he belonged.

The Firefly stopped about ten feet away and stared intently at Lennox. Lennox looked at the ground, seemingly oblivious to him.

Finally the Firefly began walking again, and just as Lennox began to relax, he turned back and said something in a dialect that Lennox had never heard before.

Lennox continued staring at the ground and made no response. The Firefly walked back to him and repeated the phrase.

"I do not understand you," muttered Lennox in the one language he had mastered.

"You are not of the Realm or the Legion," said the Firefly, switching to the *lingua franca*.

"No, I am not," replied Lennox, wondering what he was talking about.

"Nor are you of the Seven."

"That is true," said Lennox.

"There is something different about you," said the Firefly. "You mangle the language and you do not meet my gaze."

"I was born unable to speak clearly," answered Lennox, "and I do not meet your gaze because I am ashamed of my shortcoming."

It seemed like a reasonable answer, but something about it was terribly wrong, because without another word the Firefly launched himself at Lennox, his hands reaching out to clutch at the human's throat.

Lennox was caught completely off guard by the suddenness of the attack, and an instant later was struggling for his life as the Firefly's hands tightened around his neck. He delivered a swift knee to the groin, which would have disabled any human opponent, but had no effect whatsoever on the Firefly. A thumb to the armpit elicited a groan, but did not make the Firefly relinquish his hold. Lennox felt himself becoming dizzy as he gasped futilely for air. Spots began appearing before his eyes, and finally he decided the only chance he had of surviving was to match surprise with surprise. He swiftly moved a hand to his face and pulled at the scarf that covered it until it was fully exposed.

The Firefly's eyes widened. "*You are a Man!*"

Lennox used that instant to twist free. He didn't dare give his opponent time to think or call for help, and he instantly delivered a crippling kick to the Firefly's left knee. The Firefly grunted and fell to the ground and Lennox, his scarf in his hands, swiftly wrapped it around the Firefly's neck and began tightening it.

The Firefly struggled to free himself, furiously at first, then with ever weaker efforts, until he finally lay still. Lennox made sure he was alive, then quickly dragged him to the darkest section of the street, where he bound and gagged him with his own scarves.

As quick and silent as the battle had been, Lennox still could not believe that Fireflies weren't pouring into the street to determine the cause of the commotion, and decided that, early or not, he would be safer approaching the pyramid than remaining where he was. Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, he began walking to the north, his eyes and ears alert to every motion and sound.

When he had left the city and covered half the distance, he heard the draft animals of a caravan off to his right. He hid behind a rocky outcrop and watched as they came into view. There were six Fireflies mounted atop their beasts, and they led a train of thirty more animals, all carrying heavy burdens, each tied halter-to-tail to the beast ahead of it. With the sun down, four of the Fireflies had their hands and heads exposed, and he stared in fascination. They may have been dull and lackluster by day, but because of some element in their skins they literally glowed by night.

He briefly considered cutting the last animal loose with his knife, slicing its cargo loose, and mounting it, but they were noisy, temperamental animals, and he didn't want to risk exposure if the creature should start its characteristic bleating.

Still, the caravan offered him some protection once they reached the

blazing torches that surrounded the pyramid, and the tracks they made would cover his own footprints, so he waited until the first twenty animals had walked by and then quickly walked out from behind his outcropping and began walking alongside the twenty-first beast. Its head shot up and its eyes widened when it became aware of him, but it remained silent and continued walking. Lennox kept as close to it as he could, in case any of the six riders should chance to look back, but their attention was centered on the glowing torches up ahead.

The caravan came to a halt within a quarter-mile of the pyramid, and Lennox slipped into the darkness just before one of the Fireflies walked down the row of animals to make sure none had broken loose. The Fireflies then exchanged low whispers and began walking down a path that was marked by torches.

Lennox watched as they got to within thirty feet of the base of the pyramid, genuflected, made a complicated gesture with their hands, and began slowly walking around it in a counterclockwise direction.

He looked about for some sign of a priest or leader, but the only Fireflies he could see were the six members of the caravan. It didn't make any sense. This was their holiest of holy places: There *had* to be more going on than a handful of Fireflies walking in a large circle.

And suddenly he became aware that there *was* more going on. The Fireflies from the village were approaching in force, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of them. They were marching toward the pyramid in single file, and while they were still half a mile away, he quickly realized that he wouldn't be able to simply become a part of their procession as he had joined the caravan, for a number of them also bore torches, and if they kept to the same path as the caravan, they would not pass within sixty feet of him. He'd never be able to span the gap without being spotted.

He was faced with two options: he could wait until the last of them had passed and fall into step behind them, or he could approach the pyramid now, before they arrived. Since he had no guarantee that the last few Fireflies wouldn't be carrying torches, he decided upon the second alternative.

He walked briskly to the path the Fireflies all seemed to follow instinctively, then turned toward the pyramid and continued at a slower pace. When he reached the spot where the caravan members had genuflected, he did so too, and then tried as best he could to duplicate the gesture they had made with their hands. This done, he began circling the pyramid as he had seen the Fireflies do, shortening his stride to make sure he would not catch up with them.

As he continued circling to his left, passing out of sight of the horde from the village, he came to a stop and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd

made it! All he had to do now was wait until the villagers started walking around the pyramid: he would pretend to stumble, allow a few of them to pass him, and then fall into step with them so that he would be able to duplicate whatever they did. Nothing to it. The worst was over.

He was still congratulating himself on his accomplishment when a golden-robed Firefly came out of the darkness, grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around, and ripped the scarf away from his face.

"We have been expecting you, Xavier William Lennox," said the Firefly, and even though the high-pitched voice came from an alien throat, Lennox found the tones ominous.

Three more Fireflies suddenly appeared, threatening him with metal-tipped spears.

Lennox could think of no answer that would in any way mitigate his situation, so he simply stood still and made no reply.

"You have been repeatedly warned to stay away from this place," continued the Firefly. "You have been told that such an invasion of our privacy would not be permitted. And yet you have come. Why?"

"I was curious."

The Firefly emitted its equivalent of a contemptuous snort. It was an unpleasant sound.

2

Lennox's hands were bound behind his back, and he was marched toward the immense pyramid he had come so far to see. It was some sixty feet tall, and its smooth golden sides were totally devoid of any markings or carvings. It amazed him that a race as primitive as the Fireflies could have constructed it. He toyed with the possibility that some other starfaring race had created and then abandoned it, and that over the eons its origin had been forgotten as it became the holiest of the Fireflies' many religious monuments.

"This is what you came for, is it not, Xavier William Lennox?" asked the golden-robed Firefly, gesturing toward the pyramid.

"I came to study the entire ceremony," replied Lennox truthfully.

"Why?"

"I was told that it is both beautiful and awesome."

"We have no desire to see *your* religious ceremonies," said the Firefly.

"You should attend one," said Lennox. "You might find it interesting."

"Your god allows any being of any race to attend?"

"Most of my people would argue that he is your god, too."

The Firefly uttered an alien chuckle. "They are welcome to think so."

"I would be happy to exchange religious views with you," offered Lennox.

"I'm sure you would," said the Firefly.

They came to a stop at the base of the pyramid.

"What do you plan to do with me?" asked Lennox, trying to hide his nervousness.

"You knew the consequences of your actions before you came here," replied the Firefly.

"Perhaps you had better consider the consequences of *your* actions," said Lennox, trying to imbue his voice with a tone of authority. "You cannot kill a Man without retaliation."

"You are in no position to make threats."

"I'm not here to harm anyone," replied Lennox. "I came alone and unarmed. Why not simply let me observe the ceremony and leave in peace?"

The Firefly stared at him for a long moment. "You are as single-minded and foolish as you were said to be."

Something between a grimace and a wry smile passed across Lennox's face. "It's my nature."

"Your nature is irrelevant."

Another Firefly, also wearing a golden robe, approached to within twenty feet of them and gestured Lennox's captor to approach him.

"You are surrounded," said the first Firefly. "Do not move or you will be instantly killed."

With that, he walked to the other gold-robed Firefly, and the two of them engaged in an animated discussion in a dialect that Lennox could not understand. After a few minutes, the first Firefly returned to him.

"You are quite fortunate, Xavier William Lennox," he said. "My people agree that killing you will bring repercussions upon us. This is of very little importance to me, for I know my god will protect us, but there are others whose faith is not as strong as mine. Therefore, if you will give me your word that you will leave Grotanama and never return, you will be permitted to live."

Son of a bitch! thought Lennox. *They bought it. They're not going to kill me!*

"You have it," replied Lennox, then added: "As soon as I have observed the ceremony."

"Your answer is unacceptable."

"You will find the weapons of my friends even less acceptable," replied Lennox meaningfully.

"We are many, you are few," noted the Firefly. "Perhaps we shall kill you all."

"If you do, then one day soon the sky will turn black with Republic ships, and not a single Firefly, not a single draft animal, not a single plant or flower will still be alive by nightfall."

"I have already explained that your threats are meaningless."

"I am not making a threat," answered Lennox. "I am making a prediction."

The Firefly left Lennox and approached his golden-robed companion. Again they engaged in an animated conversation for a moment, and then he returned.

"We are considering the situation."

Lennox nodded. "That is a wise thing to do." He paused. "Have you a name?"

"Why?"

"I wish to know who to thank when I am released."

"My name is Chomanche, and you will not wish to thank me."

Suddenly the Fireflies fell silent and began looking up. Lennox did the same, and saw a naked Firefly, his skin glowing a pale gold in the dark, standing atop the pyramid.

"You will stay where you are until we have decided what to do with you," said Chomanche.

"Where would I go?" asked Lennox.

"Nowhere," said Chomanche decisively. He signaled to two of the armed Fireflies and uttered a brief command. Before Lennox could translate it and anticipate what was coming, each Firefly had thrust a spear through one of his feet.

Lennox bellowed in surprise and pain. He wanted to fall onto his knees, to do anything to take some of the pressure off his feet, but Chomanche held his bound hands firmly behind his back. Finally he nodded and the Fireflies withdrew their spears. It was even more excruciating than the initial thrusts. When Chomanche felt Lennox begin to collapse, he released his grip on the bonds and allowed the human to sink to the ground.

"You didn't have to do that!" grated Lennox, as blood poured out through the holes in his shoes.

"Of course we did," replied Chomanche calmly.

"I wasn't going anywhere!"

"You are not to be trusted."

Chomanche stepped a few feet away and shifted his gaze to the lone figure atop the pyramid, and, through a haze of pain, Lennox looked up.

The naked Firefly stood at the very edge, some sixty feet above them, making what Lennox assumed to be mystical signs with his hands. Suddenly his vestigial wings began flapping, the first time Lennox had ever seen any adult Firefly move the membranes on its back, and the assembled multitude began a deep, guttural singsong chant. The wings beat faster and faster until Lennox could no longer make out their shape, and then, with no warning, it hurled itself straight out into space.

For just an instant Lennox thought it might actually fly, but then it began plummeting down, its wings still fluttering with blinding speed. Halfway down it careened off the side of the pyramid, shot out fifteen feet, and continued falling to the ground, where it landed with a sickening thud.

Soon a second Firefly appeared atop the pyramid, and the entire pageant was repeated until it, too, lay dead upon the ground.

Lennox waited for a third enactment, but after a moment he realized that the crowd was no longer looking up, and he assumed that this part of the ceremony—if that was the right name for it—was over.

Lennox tried to get to his feet, but the pain was too great, and he instantly fell to the ground, cursing. He forced himself to think about something else, anything else, to take his mind off the excruciating agony.

The ceremony. Concentrate on the ceremony. Try to make sense of it.

Ritual suicide? Probably not. He didn't know much about the Fireflies' culture, but suicide didn't jibe with the bits he *did* know.

His feet began throbbing as the blood continued to ooze out of them. *Concentrate!*

If not suicide, then what? If the Fireflies didn't plan to die, then they must have thought they could fly. But of course they couldn't; their bones were too solid, their wings too flimsy, their entire structures wrong. But *if* . . . Could it be a test for a messiah of sorts? That if one of them actually *did* fly, he would become the leader?

But that was ridiculous. Those wings had *never* been able to hold a Firefly body in flight. After eons of Fireflies diving to their death from atop the pyramid, they'd have to know none of them would stay airborne.

The pain began seeping back into his consciousness. He tried to fight it back.

Both of the plungers had been males. Did that have anything to do with it? And if so, what did it mean?

Or were they criminals? But why would criminals be involved in a religious ceremony?

Suddenly a Firefly in a gold robe—not Chomanche, but one he hadn't seen before—intruded on his thoughts by chanting in a high voice. Then, when the chant stopped, the entire assemblage began racing around the base of the pyramid.

Chomanche instantly grabbed Lennox by the back of his robe and began dragging him away from the pyramid. A moment later the fastest of the Fireflies rounded a corner of the pyramid and raced over the spot where Lennox had been lying.

"Why did those two jump off the pyramid?" asked Lennox.

Chomanche summoned an armed warrior.

"Our prisoner insists upon asking questions," he said. "Take his mind off his curiosity."

The Firefly stepped behind Lennox, who struggled to turn and see what he was doing. Chomanche laid a heavy hand on his shoulder to hold him still. For a brief moment Lennox thought nothing could be worse than the uncertainty of what would happen next. Then a sharp blade came down across the fingers of his right hand, and as he fell to his side, cursing in agony, he knew he had been wrong, that the fact was worse than the anticipation.

"No more questions?" said the Firefly sardonically.

"You'd better kill me, you bastard!" snarled Lennox as blood gushed from the stumps where his fingers had been. "Because if you don't, I'll come back for you. I swear it!"

Chomanche made a clicking sound. "You are a very slow learner, Xavier William Lennox."

He nodded to the warrior, and Lennox felt an alien hand hold his left hand steady for a moment, and the blade came down again. Lennox belched an obscenity, almost fainted, bit his lip until the blood flowed freely, and glared silently at Chomanche.

"If I were you, Xavier William Lennox," said Chomanche, "I would hold my tongue while it was still in my head."

Lennox felt his wrists being tightly bound with a soft cloth. The cloth cut into them, causing them to bleed, but it was tight enough to cut off the flow of blood to his severed fingers. Then the ropes that held his hands behind him were severed, and he painfully moved his arms until his mutilated hands were in front of him. He wanted to clutch them, but realized that he no longer had anything to clutch them with. As the flow of blood stopped, he settled for crossing his arms and tucking his hands in his armpits.

Ceremonies were going on, prayers and chants were being uttered, glowing golden bodies were strutting in set patterns, but Lennox was oblivious to it all. He knew he was going to die, slowly and painfully, piece by piece, in greater agony than he had ever imagined in his worst nightmares. He concentrated on his hatred of Chomanche, which was the only thing that could even momentarily take his mind off his pain.

Two gold-robed Fireflies came up to Chomanche and whispered something to him. He nodded, replied, and turned to Lennox.

"You told me that you came alone."

"I did," muttered Lennox.

"You persist in lying to me," said Chomanche. "That is most unwise."

He nodded his head almost imperceptibly, and a sword came down from beyond Lennox's range of vision, severing the front half of his left

foot. Blood spurted out and another scream escaped him as he almost lost consciousness.

"A party of twenty Men is approaching Brakkanan," continued Chomanche. "They can have only one reason, and that of course is to find you. When they are convinced you are not there, they will come here."

"I know nothing about them," whispered Lennox, as another tourniquet was applied to his left leg.

"We cannot let them come here," said Chomanche. "We would have to kill them all, and we have no desire to bring your Republic's ships to Grotanama. Therefore, they will find you halfway between Brakkanan and the pyramid, and, having found you, they will proceed no further."

"They will hunt you down," muttered Lennox.

"They will have two choices," answered Chomanche. "They can save your life, or they can try to exact their revenge while letting you die. Since they have come to find you, they will choose the former."

He nodded to two of the warriors, who each grabbed one of Lennox's ankles and began dragging him roughly across the dry, parched ground.

He had no idea how long they dragged him, or how far. He knew that almost all the skin had been torn from his back, and that his arms and left leg were in agony from the tightness of the tourniquets. He thought he could still hear the chants from the pyramid, but he was so dizzy and so nearly unconscious that he couldn't be sure he wasn't imagining them.

Finally they came to a stop, and the warriors released him. Both legs fell hard upon the ground, and he screamed again.

"It is here that your friends shall find you, Xavier William Lennox," said Chomanche. "If you are very lucky, they may even be able to keep you alive."

Lennox didn't have the strength to reply.

"You have seen things this night that no member of your race may see," continued Chomanche. "We cannot change that, but we can remove the offending organs. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Lennox tried to get to his feet, felt an excruciating pain in what remained of his left foot, and collapsed. One of the warriors rolled him onto his back, and then each of them pinned an arm down on the ground, as Lennox struggled weakly and futilely to free himself.

"Relax, Xavier William Lennox," said Chomanche, kneeling down next to him. "Even if we let your hands loose, what could you do with them? Can you make a fist? Can you grip my arm and hold it back?"

Lennox struggled again, and one of the warriors used his free hand to hold the human's head still.

Suddenly a sharp instrument appeared in Chomanche's hand. Lennox hoped he would pass out before the hand came any closer, but he knew that he wouldn't.

3

He was unconscious for three days and delirious for two more. He had nightmares about glowing golden blades hacking away little pieces of his body. His fingers itched, but he didn't *have* any fingers. He tried to roll over and found that he was strapped to his bed. He seemed to think that he was tied into a barrage of machines by a plethora of tubes and wires, but he couldn't open his eyes to see them.

Finally he became aware of a steady prodding against his shoulder. He wanted to tell whoever was bothering him to go away, that as long as he was asleep nothing hurt and that he could handle his nightmares, but if he woke up he'd be faced with a terrible reality, that he wanted to sleep the rest of his life away. The prodding continued and his mouth was so dry that his tongue was stuck to the roof of it and he couldn't say anything without pulling it loose, and he didn't want any more pain, not even the mild discomfort of speaking. He moaned and tried to roll away, but the restraints held him motionless.

"The machines say you're awake, Mr. Lennox," said a feminine voice.

He lay perfectly still, hoping to lull the machines into making a mistake.

"You're lucky to be alive," continued the voice.

The nightmares vanished, to be replaced by the memories, which were worse.

"Define 'lucky,'" mumbled Lennox.

"If we'd found you ten minutes later, you'd be dead."

Lennox was too busy trying to erase the images of Chomanche's knife from his mind to reply.

"You were in a very bad way."

Now tell me something I don't know.

"I see your eyelids fluttering, Mr. Lennox," said the voice. "Please don't try to open them. They've been sealed shut to prevent infection."

He suddenly felt an urge to wiggle his fingers and toes, and fought to resist it.

"Are you in any pain?" asked the voice.

He did a quick survey and found, to his surprise, that he *wasn't* in pain.

"I don't think so."

"That's because we've given you a very strong pain-blocker," said the voice. "It'll mask your pain, but shouldn't affect your perceptions."

You'll be able to think clearly, once you adjust to your current circumstances."

"What *are* my circumstances?"

"You're in the infirmary of a Republic ship bound for Hippocrates, the medical research center that orbits Windsor V."

"That's *our* circumstances," he rasped. "What are *mine*?"

"You have been severely mutilated, Mr. Lennox," was the answer. "Part of your left foot was severed, and both feet seem to have been pierced with swords or spears. You are missing three fingers from your right hand and four from your left. Both of your eyes have been removed, and your left ear was sliced off. I am told that when you were found, you were pinned to the ground with a pair of spears that were run through your shoulders." The voice paused. "You have undergone three surgeries and four transfusions. It was necessary to amputate the rest of your left foot—infection had spread throughout it, and we were, after all, fighting to save your life—and we also had to remove the stubs of your fingers for the same reason. Evidently you'd been dragged through sand and dirt with these gaping wounds; it would have been impossible for them *not* to become infected."

"Were there any reprisals against the Fireflies?"

"I have no idea," replied the voice. "I don't even know what a Firefly is."

Lennox was silent for a moment. "How come I'm not hungry? It's been five days since I've eaten."

"You're being fed intravenously."

"Are you my doctor or my nurse?"

"I'm *one* of your doctors. You've got six of them at the moment." A pause. "You're one of my most famous patients. I've read all four of your books." Another pause. "You came across as a very grumpy traveler. If this is what you go through to get material for a book, I can understand why."

Lennox frowned. "I'm getting groggy."

"Your system has had too many severe shocks, both on Medina and in surgery. You'll spend most of the next week sleeping."

"My family . . ."

"They've been informed. They'll be waiting for you at Hippocrates."

He was sure he had more questions to ask, but he was asleep before he could think of them.

4

Lennox had been home for five weeks. He spent most of his time dictating to his computer and editing the resultant manuscript. He left his

house only for regular visits to the local hospital, where he pleased his doctors with the speed of his recovery and mystified them by his refusal to use any of the prosthetic devices they had given him except for one artificial eye.

He hired three nurses to serve eight-hour shifts, but within a month he no longer needed them, and replaced them with a rotating series of "personal companions," whose primary duties were to fix his meals, dress and bathe him, and act as a first line of defense against unwanted visitors.

After he finished the first two chapters of his latest book, he transmitted them to his agent, Angela Stone, a striking redhead who was also the second of his three ex-wives. He was not surprised when she showed up on his doorstep ten days later; he instructed his companion of the moment to usher her into his paneled study and then leave the two of them alone.

Angela, dressed in a business suit that seemed to change pastel shades as she moved, entered the room, and Lennox stared admiringly at her out of his single eye.

"You know, you're still a damned fine-looking woman," he said by way of greeting.

She stared at him without comment.

"You seem distrustful," he observed.

"I am."

"Can't I offer an honest compliment without you thinking I want something in return?"

"You never have before," she replied, opening her briefcase. She withdrew a thick contract and tossed it onto a table, then sat down across from Lennox.

"How am I expected to sign that?" he asked dryly.

"If you want the money, you'll find a way," said Angela with no show of sympathy. "You've got a whole roomful of prosthetics upstairs, Xavier. Playing the tragic hero may impress your adoring public, but *I* know better." He was about to answer but she held up a hand. "It's been five weeks now," she continued. "You've already had the press photograph you in this disgusting state, and I'm sure you've got an absolutely revolting portrait ready for your dust jacket. Just out of curiosity, how much longer do you intend to act the crippled martyr before you finally use your new hands and feet?"

"After I make a couple of public appearances," said Lennox. "I'm giving a speech on Roosevelt III next week, and another one on Sirius V the week after. I think my appearance will reinforce what I have to say."

"I doubt it," replied Angela. "The critics are already having some difficulty deciding whether you want to be a scholar or a sensationalist."

"Who says they have to be incompatible?" asked Lennox. "One pays for the other."

"This is *me* you're talking to, Xavier," she said. "I lived with you for three years, remember?"

"Serves me right for marrying my agent," he said wryly. "You made me rich, and then took half my money when you left."

"You're not an easy man to live with," she noted. "I earned every credit of it."

"So did my other wives," he replied with a rueful smile. "That's why I see nothing wrong with sensationalism. I've got a lot of bills to pay, and you three ladies are sitting on all my ill-gotten gains."

"Rubbish," she said. "I *know* you, Xavier."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"I mean this has nothing to do with money." She paused. "I've read the chapters you sent me."

"How did you like them?"

"They scared the hell out of me," she replied honestly. "That's why I'm here."

"Good! I haven't lost my touch."

"That's not what I mean," she said. "You're going back, aren't you?"

"Back?" he repeated.

"To Medina."

"After what they did to me?" he said. "You couldn't pay me enough to go back."

"You don't do it for the money, Xavier," replied Angela firmly. "You never did."

"The hell I don't."

"You can lie to yourself, but you can't lie to me," she continued. "I know you too well. I used to think that you were just an overgrown boy, that you loved to go off on adventures, and that someday you'd grow up."

"You were wrong."

"I know," she said. "I was wrong about a lot of things. Thinking of you as an immature adventurer was too simplistic." She paused and stared at him. "I think you've only truly loved two things in your life, Xavier: yourself—and death." She smiled wryly. "Here you are, risking your life on all these alien worlds, and publishers actually pay you to do it." She uttered a short, dry laugh. "If they only knew you as I do, they'd *charge* you."

"The amateur psychiatrist strikes again," he shot back contemptuously. "Aren't you tired of analyzing me?"

"It goes hand-in-glove with knowing you," she replied seriously. "I've been doing it ever since our marriage started falling apart. If you'd been

attracted to another woman, or even to a man, I would have known what to do, how to fight back. But I lost you to a series of nameless dangers on uncharted worlds. I didn't know how to compete with them, so I tried to find out why you were so obsessed by them."

"It's the way I make my living," he said defensively. "None of you ever understood that."

She stared briefly at the various alien artifacts that lined the walls of the study, then answered him.

"Other men and women have made their livings visiting alien worlds and writing up their experiences. Only *you* feel compelled to continually put your life at risk."

"The reason my books sell so well is because I don't just dabble on the surface of things," he explained irritably. "I don't just *observe* the natives; I *live* with them. I share their food and their quarters, I learn their customs and their beliefs. When you're through with one of my books, you *know* what a world is like!"

"And you really think that's why people buy your books?"

"What other reason is there?"

"They're voyeurs, Xavier. They don't want to learn about aliens. They want your account of swallowing a live snake on Bareimus II, or that aberrant interspecies sexual escapade that got you kicked out of the Albion Cluster." She paused. "They won't give a damn about the Fireflies, but they'll buy a million copies of your next book just to read about your mutilation."

"I've had enough!" snapped Lennox angrily, slamming a hand down on the arm of his chair. "My books are *important*. Maybe I had to listen to all this shit when we were married, but I sure as hell don't have to now. If you don't like what I write, just say so and I'll get a new agent!"

"As long as your books sell, I'm your agent, and a damned good one at that," she shot back. "You owe me that much for all the hell you put me through."

"If you're not trying to end our business relationship, then what is this all about?"

"If you weren't so totally self-absorbed, you'd *know* what it's about," said Angela. "I don't want you to go back to die on Medina."

"Is that my wife speaking, or my agent?" he asked sarcastically.

"Both," she said. "Your agent doesn't want her best source of income to dry up, and your ex-wife still feels some slight affection for you, God knows why."

"You make me sound like a psychological basket case." He held up his fingerless hands. "What I am is a *physical* basket case. Nothing could get me to go back there."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" said Angela. "I'm the woman

you left behind to go to Jefferson III and New Ghana and Cinderblock. If your publisher gives you the tiniest excuse, you'll be packing your bags two minutes later."

Lennox shook his head adamantly. "Not this time. Those bastards cut me to ribbons."

"I know."

"They impaled me with their spears and left me for dead," he continued with an involuntary shudder. "And you think I'd go back after that?"

Angela paused for a moment before answering. "The truth?" she said at last. "I think you'd go back *because* of that."

"Not without protection."

"Then you *have* been thinking of it," she said accusingly.

"I've been thinking of what I did wrong," he said, flustered.

"And how to do it right the next time?" said Angela. "For God's sake, Xavier, there are bits and pieces of you rotting on three different planets! Isn't that enough?"

"You don't understand!" he snapped. "None of you have ever understood!"

"Then help me to," she said. "Make me understand the attraction that a hideous death on an alien world holds for you."

"You think I go there to die?" he shouted at her. "I go there to *learn*!"

"And what do you think you've learned?"

"Read my books," he said caustically. "It's all there in black and white."

"I *have* read them. All I've learned is that people who do foolish things usually pay a price for it."

"They also accomplish things! Do you want me to sit in this room, staring at four walls, for the rest of my life?"

"Of course not."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"I want you to write the books you're capable of writing," she said. "But without trying to sneak into places humans are forbidden to go, and without participating in the ceremonies humans aren't even permitted to see." She paused and stared at him. "Tell me, Xavier—have you ever gone to a world that *didn't* have taboos for you to break?"

"Sometimes it's necessary to get the story I want."

"Like on Medina?"

"Precisely."

"Then answer me this," said Angela. "According to your manuscript, you had already stolen a copy of the Fireflies' holy book. Leaving aside the morality of stealing anyone's bible, once you got your hands on it, why was it necessary to risk your life going to the pyramid?"

"You can't understand a High Mass just by reading the New Testa-

ment," answered Lennox. He paused. "I saw two Fireflies leap to their deaths from atop that pyramid, and I'll wager there's nothing in their bible that tells me why they did it."

"I know. And it's precisely *what* you are willing to wager that I find so disturbing." She paused again. "Don't you bear them any ill will at all for what they did to you?"

"Not really," said Lennox thoughtfully. "You've got to understand that I was invading their territory against their wishes."

"You shouldn't be trying to understand them, Xavier. You should either be doing your best to forget the incident ever happened, or else urging the Navy to incinerate the whole damned planet. Your reaction isn't normal."

Lennox shrugged. "It feels normal to me."

"I know. That's the problem."

"It's an interesting culture."

"It's a brutal, barbaric culture."

"That's one of the things that makes it interesting."

She sighed. "I wish you found *people* half as interesting. You'd live a lot longer." She got to her feet. "I suppose I should kiss you good-bye and tell you to come back with another bestseller, but I just can't bring myself to do that." She walked to the door, then turned to him. "Just try not to act too irresponsibly when you go back to Medina."

"I told you: I'm not going back."

"I know," she replied. "But when you do, remember what I said."

She turned and left the room.

Lennox stared at the door for a moment, then shrugged as if to physically remove the annoyance of the past few minutes. Finally he turned to the computer and ordered it to bring up yet another text on Medina.

5

Lennox had just finished giving his speech on Sirius V. Even he had to admit it had been impressive. He'd held the audience in the palm of his hand, describing his adventures on Medina in vivid detail. Now it was time for the question-and-answer session, and he called upon a young woman toward the front of the audience.

"What attracts you to these exotic alien worlds?" she asked.

Standard Answer Number 3, he thought to himself, as he wondered how soon the banquet would begin.

Aloud he said: "As a young boy I always wanted to see what lay beyond the next hill. Now I want to see what lies beyond the next star system." He paused. "There are thousands of fascinating worlds out there. Has anyone here ever been to Doradus?" There was no response.

"Well, *I* have. The inhabitants never stand still. They have these incredibly long, stiltlike legs, and they follow the sun over the horizon, never stopping, never resting, never experiencing the dark. They mate, they give birth, they love and hate and grow old without ever halting in their endless trek.

"And there are the Brozians of Namatos VI. They reproduce by budding, just like vegetables. They've never developed computers; in fact, they have yet to develop a written language—and yet they've created a new branch of mathematics that less than a dozen Men have been able to grasp. And there are the Djebels, intelligent reptiles who have created a complex, functioning society despite the fact that they become comatose when the temperature drops.

"How can one know about such places and beings and *not* want to see them at first hand?"

His answer received polite applause, as it always did, and then a man seated over to the side stood up.

"If you have such respect for alien races, why do you constantly break their laws?"

"I have never broken an alien law," replied Lennox firmly.

"Let me rephrase that, then," persisted the man. "Why do you behave in a manner that you know is contrary to their wishes?"

Who let this idiot in? I thought they were supposed to screen the questions.

"If we're ever to live in harmony with our fellow beings," he said, thinking half a sentence ahead, "it is essential that we understand them. It is not enough to know that they do not desire our presence. We must learn *why* they feel that way, so that we can adjust our behavior to such a degree that we will no longer be unwelcome."

"But doesn't invading their privacy reaffirm their desire not to have anything to do with us?"

"It's not that simple," answered Lennox. "The Republic is the dominant force in the galaxy, and these races are going to come into contact with us whether they like it or not. The more we can learn about them, the more we can behave in such a manner that they eventually learn to accept us."

I sound like an idiot! Why do they keep letting him follow up with more questions?

An elderly man stood up to ask about the Fireflies' social structure, and Lennox gratefully answered him at considerable length. He then apologized for cutting the session short, explaining that he had not yet fully recovered his strength, and joined his hosts for cocktails until the start of the banquet.

He had his usual difficult time eating without the use of his fingers,

but a lovely blonde cut his food for him and fed him as if he were a baby. Half of him reveled in the attention while the other half found the situation totally ridiculous and more than a bit demeaning.

He was as charming and gracious as the situation required, and made a short after-dinner speech that was really just a plug for his forthcoming book. Then, again using his health as an excuse, he announced that he wished to retire to the suite his sponsors had provided, where he had every intention of spending the next few hours reading or watching some mindless entertainment. He had hoped to make his exit using a pair of crutches—that was usually good for a newstape holo—but they had provided him with a mobile chair and he rode it to the airlift, then ascended some thirty levels to his suite. The blonde made sure that he got there, but didn't offer to come in with him, and he decided it was no great loss.

He entered the sumptuous parlor and ordered the curtains to part, revealing the frigid, airless surface beyond the protective dome. He then contacted room service and told them to send up a bottle of Alphard brandy and charge it to his sponsors.

He pulled a prosthetic hand out of his luggage, used it to get out of his formal attire, then took a dryshower and changed into a more casual outfit. When he emerged from the bedroom he found that the brandy had already been delivered, and he poured himself a glass.

The room's security system informed him that he had a visitor, and, assuming that the blonde had returned and wondering vaguely if he was pleased or displeased about it, Lennox removed the prosthetic hand, stuck it beneath his chair, and ordered the door to open. It slid back, revealing a small, chunky, middle-aged woman in a severely cut gray business suit that almost matched the color of her hair.

"Mr. Lennox?" she said.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"My name is Nora Wallace. May I come in?"

Lennox shrugged. "Why not?"

"Thank you," she said, entering the parlor as the door closed behind her.

"I don't remember seeing you in the audience," observed Lennox.

"I wasn't there."

"If you're here to give me my fee, it's supposed to be deposited in my account."

She ignored his statement and walked over to the bottle of brandy.

"From Alphard!" she said, impressed. "I haven't had an Alphard brandy in, oh, it must be four years now. Maybe five. Do you mind?"

"Help yourself."

"Thank you." She filled a small glass. "May I sit down?"

"Whatever makes you happy," said Lennox, staring at her. "You *are* eventually going to tell me who you are and why you're here, aren't you?"

"Certainly," said Nora Wallace, sitting down on a chair that floated gently a few inches above the floor. She sipped the brandy. "Ah! It's as good as I remember!"

He stared at her silently.

"Won't you join me?" she said. "Please feel free to use whatever prosthetic device you employed to open and pour it."

Lennox grinned, pulled the artificial hand out from where he had hidden it, quickly attached it, and picked up his glass.

"To Medina," she said, lifting her own glass.

"What about Medina?" he asked sharply.

"It's a fascinating world."

"I know."

"And an important one."

He stared at her. "Just who the hell *are* you?"

Nora tossed a titanium identification card to him. "I'm the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Alien Affairs. My specialty is the Quinellus Cluster."

He made no reply.

"Medina is in the Quinellus Cluster," she continued.

"I know where it is."

"You look annoyed, Mr. Lennox," she noted with amusement.

"If your department thinks they're going to censor anything I have to say or write about Medina . . ."

"We're not in the censorship business."

"Then you want me to add something, or perhaps slant the material."

"What you write is a matter of complete indifference to us, Mr. Lennox."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"That's what I'm here to talk about," said Nora, taking another sip of her brandy. "I heard you speak on Roosevelt III last week. I think your experiences were remarkable." She paused. "I also think they were incomplete."

"How much more of me did you want chopped off?" he asked sarcastically.

Nora Wallace smiled. "I admire your sense of humor, Mr. Lennox. It must be very difficult to joke about what happened to you."

"I assume there's a point to all this?"

"Certainly." She paused. "How would you like to go back to Medina?"

"Seriously?" he said, surprised.

"I didn't come all this way to be facetious, Mr. Lennox," she replied.

Don't let her see how eager you are. Only a crazy man would want to go back, and the government doesn't deal with crazy men.

"The Department of Alien Affairs doesn't have a military arm," he noted. "And I'm a marked man on Medina."

"What if I told you that we have ways of protecting you?" she persisted. "Would you be interested?"

"It's possible," he said noncommittally. "What's *your* interest in Medina?"

"Our geological surveys tell us that there are at least six, and possibly as many as eight, diamond pipes in the desert to the east of the city known as Brakkanan. The Republic wants to set up a mining operation."

"The Fireflies will never permit it."

"Even if we offer them a lease agreement that stipulates a percentage of the profits?"

What the hell is she talking about? Where do I fit in?

"It would be meaningless to them," replied Lennox. "They still operate on a barter economy. Credits are just so much useless paper to them."

"That's our department's conclusion as well," said Nora. "Would you like to know the Republic's response?"

"I can guess."

"You don't have to guess, Mr. Lennox," she said. "They have given the Department of Alien Affairs one year to get the Fireflies to agree to a lease."

"And if they refuse?"

"Then the Navy will move in with as much force as is required to pacify the natives and protect our mining operation."

"*Pacify*," repeated Lennox, unable to keep the contempt from his voice. "A polite euphemism for genocide."

"In essence." She leaned forward. "That's why I have been authorized to seek you out. I've heard you speak about Medina, and you seem to bear the Fireflies no malice—but to be perfectly honest you are a masterful showman, and I have no idea what your true feelings might be."

"Even if you *can* protect me, I'm the last Man they'd listen to."

"We're operating in a limited time frame, and you know more about the Fireflies than any other Man. Also, as far as I've been able to ascertain, you're one of the few Men who speaks their language fluently."

"They've got hundreds of languages and dialects," said Lennox. "I speak only one."

"The one they speak in Brakkanan, right?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well, there you have it. We'll be dealing with the Brakkanan Fireflies."

"I'm curious to know how you expect me to negotiate with them when they probably have orders to kill me on sight."

"I told you: we have means of protecting you."

You'd better be right—because if you make the offer, there's no way I'm going to refuse.

"This is a society with a warrior caste. Anything less than a heavily armed regiment will be ineffective." He paused. "And if you've got a regiment handy, then you don't need me. So what's the deal?"

Nora smiled. "If you agree to work for us, you will return to Medina alone and unarmed."

Lennox laughed harshly. "Lady, you're crazier than I am!"

Quick correction: almost no way.

"You are quite right that if we wanted to use force, we'd have no need for you, Mr. Lennox. We want you because of your intelligence and your experience." She stared at him for a moment. "If you agree," she concluded, "we propose to invest more than one hundred million credits in you."

"That's enough!" he snapped irritably. "I thought you were making a legitimate offer. What kind of stupid joke is this?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"None of my books has ever earned as much as two million credits, and suddenly you're going to pay me fifty times that much? I don't know who put you up to this, but you're wasting my time."

"You misunderstand, Mr. Lennox," she explained patiently. "I didn't say we would *pay* you one hundred million credits. You will get rich enough selling a book based on your experiences—and I guarantee that your experiences will be the stuff of bestsellers. I said we would *invest* the money in you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will," Nora assured him.

"So I'm expected to just walk in there, negotiate, and walk back out without anyone laying a finger on me?"

"I said that we have the means to protect you," answered Nora. "I did *not* say that the mission was without risk."

"I don't mind a reasonable amount of risk," said Lennox. "It goes with the territory and makes good reading."

"Then may I assume that you *are* interested in returning to Medina if I can show you that you will not be subjected to an immediate attack?"

"You say that as if you're anticipating a delayed attack," he noted wryly.

"That will depend entirely upon you, Mr. Lennox."

He poured himself another brandy. "All right, let me see if I've got this straight so far. You want me to return to Medina and try to talk the

Fireflies into allowing the Republic to begin mining operations. You're spending a hundred million credits to safeguard my mission, yet I'm to operate alone, with no military support. If I survive, you're willing to let me write about my experiences and sell them. Have I got it right so far?"

"Yes. Are you interested?"

Suddenly he grinned at her. "Hell, yes!" he said. "Now, just how do you think you're going to protect me?"

"I was coming to that." She leaned forward. "We'll have to move fast, because the Republic hasn't given us very much time."

"That might be a problem," said Lennox.

"Oh? Why?"

"Look at me," said Lennox. "I could be half a year just learning how to use all the prosthetic devices that are waiting for me at home."

Nora Wallace smiled. "Forget about them, Mr. Lennox," she said. "We have other plans for you."

6

Lennox stopped a few feet away from the table and stared intently at the body of the Firefly.

"Is it real?" he asked.

"Absolutely," said the tall, angular woman in the white laboratory smock.

"Where did you get it?"

"From Medina, of course."

"I know that," said Lennox irritably. "I meant, *how* did you get it?"

"Don't concern yourself with details, Mr. Lennox," said the woman. She stared down at the Firefly's body. "They're remarkable creatures, aren't they?"

Lennox made no reply. He noticed a tightening in the pit of his stomach.

"Interesting musculature," continued the woman. "And for the life of me, I simply cannot understand the vestigial wing structure. These creatures never flew at any point in their evolutionary history."

"Let's grant that Fireflies are unique and wonderful and awe-inspiring. Nora Wallace told me that you would explain the process, Doctor . . ."

"Doctor Ngoni," came the reply. "Since we're going to be working closely together for an extended period, I have no objection to you calling me Beatrice."

"I don't know for a fact that we're going to be working together for more than this afternoon," said Lennox. "If you can make Nora Wallace's scheme sound plausible, you'd better start doing so right now."

"I'll do my best," said Beatrice Ngoni, conducting Lennox to the next room, which contained a desk, a pair of computers, and a trio of chrome chairs. "Won't you sit down?"

Lennox seated himself on one of the chairs, while Beatrice Ngoni sat down behind her desk.

"I'm still waiting," said Lennox.

"I know," she said. "I'll tell you what I can, but you must understand that the process is as new to us as it is to you."

"I doubt it," said Lennox. "I never heard of it until last night."

"That doesn't mean that anything we plan to do isn't simply an extension of things we've done before," she continued, ignoring his comment. "As you know, I am a reconstructive surgeon. Under other circumstances, I would be repairing the damage done to your body and fitting you with various prostheses. In a way, that's precisely what I *will* be doing over the next few months."

"But you've never done *this* before."

She smiled. "No human has ever had to pass for a Firefly on Medina before."

"I mean, you've never remade a Man into an alien?" he persisted.

She shook her head. "No. But we've fitted men out with unique prosthetic devices that have been designed to help them in their occupations."

"All right," said Lennox. "Tell me what's involved in the process."

"Didn't Nora Wallace already explain it to you?"

"Nora Wallace is a bureaucrat with her own agenda," said Lennox. "I want to hear it from the surgeon who's in charge of the operations."

"As you wish, Mr. Lennox," she said, exhaling deeply. "First, we will remove your arms and legs. The musculature and joints are all wrong. They will be replaced by prosthetic limbs that are identical to those of a Firefly. We will also shorten your torso and redesign your hip joints. The greatest amount of surgery will be on your face, since it will be exposed at all times. We'll have to reshape the cheekbones and the jaw, eliminate the nose, give you eyes the same color as a Firefly's, elongate the skull, and remove all facial hair, even that in your nostrils and ears."

Lennox frowned. "How much of *me* will be left?"

"The essential you—your brain, your central nervous system, and your heart—will remain unchanged. We're not sure about your internal organs yet. You'll keep them, of course, but we may have to add a few artificial ones."

"Artificial organs?" he said. "Why?"

"To help you cope with the heat and the lower oxygen content of the air," she explained. "We'll have to remove most of your sweat glands, though we'll probably allow you to sweat through your feet. We'll have

to change your metabolism, too; you're going to have to eat and drink what Fireflies eat and drink, or you will call too much attention to yourself." She paused. "We'll also give you some muscular control of your wings. The tricky part will be the skin. You describe it as appearing normal in the sunlight yet able to glow in the dark. I gather it is not an involuntary reaction, since according to your manuscript not all Fireflies glow at night. Unfortunately, the three specimens I have examined are no longer capable of glowing. I don't know what triggers it. To be truthful, I don't even know exactly what it looks like. If we can't come up with some harmless chemical coating and a means of distributing it over your body when you're being observed, it's entirely possible that we may have to give you an artificial epidermis as well."

"So what you're saying is that you're going to replace my arms, legs, and skin, and redesign the rest of me?" Lennox grimaced. "That's more than *they* did."

"We're also going to have to replace your genitals, Mr. Lennox," she said. "They are totally different from those of a Firefly."

"Now just a minute . . ."

"What's the point of doing all the other surgery if you still have a human's genitals?" she replied.

Lennox was silent for a moment. "Before we go any farther, let me ask the operative question," he said. "Assuming I return alive from Medina, can you put me back the way I was?"

"Well, yes and no," said Beatrice Ngoni.

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

"We won't be able to reattach your own limbs and genitals, and it's possible you may not be able to grow a new epidermis if we totally remove the old one. But we will be able to rebuild you with totally functional limbs and genitals. We will attach them to your neural passageways, and you will be able to function normally in every respect."

"In *every* respect?" repeated Lennox meaningfully.

"Including sexually," she replied. "In fact, you may well consider the end result a decided improvement. We can make you stronger, faster and healthier than you were, and you'll have the added advantage of knowing that you will never again break a limb."

"You're sure?"

She smiled. "Turning you into a Firefly is the difficult part. Believe me, if we can do that, we can certainly turn you back into a Man."

"You said 'if,' " noted Lennox. "What's the downside?"

"That should be obvious. The downside is that you'll die on the operating table—or perhaps that you'll survive the surgery but give yourself away on Medina." She paused. "You were very fortunate to be rescued last time, Mr. Lennox. I think it's safe to say that by the time we

get through with you, no human will endanger his own life to rescue what you have become."

He considered her answer for a moment. "How many operations are we looking at here?"

"Seven, possibly eight, depending on the epidermis," answered Beatrice Ngoni. "Each operation will take approximately ten hours, and will require a team of between six and eight surgeons."

"And the schedule?"

"That will depend upon your resiliency," she replied. "Personally, I'd like to give you a month to recover from each surgery, but I gather that will not be possible, given the Republic's deadline. If you're up to it, we'll probably schedule one operation every ten to fourteen days. Then there will follow a recovery period, during which time you will have to learn how to function in your new body. The Department of Alien Affairs insists that you leave for Medina as soon as possible." She paused again. "First, though, before we begin any surgical procedures, you'll be questioned extensively, under hypnosis, for at least a week."

"Why?"

"We need to know everything that *you* know about Fireflies, including things you may have forgotten. For example, we have no idea what a Firefly sounds like when it speaks, so we have no idea how to adjust your vocal cords."

"I don't need hypnosis to tell you that."

"Perhaps not—but there are thousands of other details. For example, have you ever seen a Firefly sneeze or cough or blink? Do they have any involuntary reflexes, minor things you might have seen but which made little or no impression on you at the time? When they tire, do they pant? When they sleep, do they snore? How acute is their hearing? Their sense of smell? You spent time in a prison cell with one of them: how did he urinate and defecate?"

"All right, all right, I see the need for it."

"Fine," she said. "Have you any other questions?"

"Just one. What, in your professional opinion, are the odds that the operations will be successful?"

"Define successful."

"Will I survive?"

"I'd say you have a seventy-percent chance of survival."

"And will I be able to pass for a Firefly?"

"That's a chancier proposition. Although we've never performed such extensive cosmetic surgery before, there is no reason why it shouldn't work. But of course, whether or not you pass inspection ultimately depends on *you*, Mr. Lennox. We can make you look like a Firefly, but only you can act like one—or fail to do so." She shrugged. "You

may be able to live among them for months, or you may give yourself away in the first minute of contact."

Lennox was silent for a long moment as he tried to assimilate everything she had told him. Finally he stared across the table at her.

"Doctor Ngoni, what would do you in my place?"

"Given the treatment you've already received at their hands," said Beatrice Ngoni, "I think it's ridiculous to even consider placing yourself in their power again. However . . ."

"However?"

"I've seen your psychological profile."

"Oh?"

"It suggests that you are an exceptionally wilful, stubborn, self-centered man who thrives on the unique hazards of his profession and possesses only a minimal sense of survival. My understanding is that the more I discuss the dangers of both the surgery and your mission, the more eager you will be to undergo them."

"You remind me of one of my ex-wives," remarked Lennox wryly.

"I beg your pardon!" she said heatedly.

"I didn't mean to offend you," said Lennox. "It just that both of you seem to be of the opinion that I should be wearing a straitjacket."

"In the end, you might find it more comfortable than wearing a Firefly's body," said Beatrice Ngoni. "On the other hand, I suppose I should add that I consider your psychological profile to be very type that promises the greatest likelihood of success."

"Why should you say that?" asked Lennox curiously.

"Because obsession will work to your advantage. If physical mutilation didn't stop you, I see no reason why the discomfort and dangers of physical transformation should."

"My feelings precisely."

She withdrew a single sheet of paper from a desk drawer. "I want you to read this before you leave."

"What is it?" he asked, staring at it.

"A release absolving the hospital and the Department of Alien Affairs of any responsibility should you die during surgery or in the course of your mission." She paused. "And now, have you any further questions?"

"Just one," said Lennox. He flashed her a disarming smile. "Do you have a pen?"

7

"Shit!"

Lennox tumbled heavily to the floor and lay there, panting.

"Are you all right, Mr. Lennox?" asked Beatrice Ngoni.

"No, I am not all right!" snapped Lennox. "I hurt in places I didn't even know I had." He paused, frowning. "You wouldn't think it'd be this hard to learn to walk with a Firefly's legs. *They* don't seem to have any trouble doing it."

"They've had their whole lives to practice," she replied. "You've walked like a Man for thirty-four years, and you're not quite halfway to being a Firefly even now." She stood before him. "Can you get up by yourself?"

"Of course I can get up by myself!"

"Well, then?"

"I'm resting."

"You'll have plenty of time to rest after the next operation," she said. "It's essential that you begin mastering your new body."

"I am."

"You are sprawled on the floor."

"I'm adjusting to my new vision," he said. "*You* try getting used to a world where all the blues have turned to gray and you're seeing two new colors plus a bunch of infrared waves."

"It shouldn't change your perception of shape and distance," remarked Beatrice.

"No, but it takes some getting used to."

He got unsteadily to his feet.

"Be careful," said Beatrice. "You're leaning too far forward."

He adjusted his position as best he could. "Why are they jointed like this?" he asked in frustration, indicating his legs. "What purpose does it serve?"

"The Fireflies didn't evolve the way Men did," she replied. "They were never aboreal. Once you learn to balance, you'll find that you can run far faster on these legs than you ever could on your own."

"Were they predator or prey?" asked Lennox.

She shrugged. "I have no idea. Probably both, at one time or another." She paused. "Are you ready?"

He nodded.

"All right," she said. "Begin walking counterclockwise around the room again."

Lennox started walking in an awkward gait. "When am I going to get my new hands?" he asked. "I have this urge to clutch at things to keep from falling."

"Next week," she answered. "It's better that you learn to walk without them. I'm sure that Fireflies don't constantly grab things to keep their balance, and I don't want you to get into the habit."

He spent another hour practicing with his new legs, then broke for lunch.

"How does it taste?" asked Beatrice, as an attendant spoon-fed him the mushlike porridge that served as the Fireflies' staple diet.

"I can handle it," he replied.

"That's not good enough, Mr. Lennox," she said. "I've read your books, and I'm well aware of the fact that you've eaten far less palatable things. However, for our purposes, it's essential that you not only eat it but *like* it."

"That's going to take some doing."

"I'm quite serious," said Beatrice. "We'll make various adjustments to your taste buds until you *do* like it."

"It's not necessary," replied Lennox. "I can eat it like this."

"You're not thinking, Mr. Lennox," she persisted. "We do not anticipate that you will eat many meals alone, not if your mission is to succeed. If you are given spoiled food, or bitter food, or food that in any way offends the Firefly palate, and only *you* do not notice or protest, you could give yourself away." She paused and stared at him. "*Now* do you understand?"

He sighed and nodded. "Do what you have to do."

"I always intended to."

Lennox cursed aloud as he failed again.

"Try once more, please," said Beatrice Ngoni.

"Firefly males don't sew garments, so why the hell should they know how to thread a needle?" he asked irritably.

"It's a simple hand-eye coordination exercise," she replied. "You'll undergo several more before you're ready."

"It's so chilly in here it's hard to hold my hands steady," he said.

"Good," said Beatrice. "I was hoping you'd notice."

"What's the temperature?"

"Twenty-three degrees Celsius."

He turned to her. "You're kidding!"

"I'm quite serious." She smiled at him. "You're becoming a Firefly, Mr. Lennox."

He awoke to the sound of gibberish. He shook his head to clear it, then opened his eyes and found himself facing a uniformed man.

"Good morning, Mr. Lennox," he said. "I am Major Luis Eduardo Belmonte." He smiled. "We are to be constant companions from this moment until you leave for Medina."

"We are?" said Lennox groggily. "Why?"

"Because I speak the Brakkanan dialect. Not as well as you, I am sure, but well enough to understand it and to make myself understood. These are the last words I will utter to you in Terran, and from this mo-

ment until you leave for Medina you will speak only in the dialect." He shifted languages. "Is that quite clear?"

"Quite," replied Lennox in the Brakkanan dialect.

"Good," said Belmonte. "It has been suggested that we attach a device to you that will give you a mild . . . ah . . . shall we say, *correction*, every time you revert to Terran. Will you consent to this?"

"How mild?"

"Speak only in the dialect and you will never know."

Lennox considered it, then nodded his acquiescence. "Yes, I consent to it."

"Excellent," said Belmonte. "I gather that the surgery on your larynx, tongue and lips will not take place for another six days, so I don't expect perfect enunciation or inflection from you until that time."

"My language skills have already passed muster on Medina," said Lennox. "You'll have to accept my word for it. You're hardly the one to judge me; you've got an accent I could cut with a knife."

"A point well taken," agreed Belmonte. "At any rate, from this moment on you will speak to the hospital staff only through me."

"Fine," said Lennox. "How long were you stationed on Medina?"

"I was there for almost five years. It took me that long to learn what little of the Brakkanan dialect I know. I envy you your language skills."

"Were you there when I had my little misadventure?"

Belmonte shook his head. "No, I was on furlough. But I heard about it." He paused. "I can't believe that *anyone* made it to the pyramid!"

"As it turned out, making it there was easier than making it back," remarked Lennox wryly.

"I understand you've already written a few chapters about your experiences on Medina," said Belmonte. "I wonder if I could read them sometime."

"They're in the computer," answered Lennox, gesturing to the glowing cube that sat on his desk. "Be my guest."

"Thank you," said Belmonte. "I look forward to it." He wiped some sweat from his brow and loosened his military tunic. "They keep it awfully warm in here, don't they?"

"I hadn't noticed," said Lennox truthfully.

"Is it working?" asked Lennox as he tried to flutter the translucent membranes that sprouted out from where his shoulder blades had once been.

"Just slightly," replied Belmonte.

"I can't feel them at all," complained Lennox.

Belmonte translated his statement for Beatrice Ngoni.

"That's because they're artificial constructs, and you're using muscles

you never used before." She paused. "In fact, muscles you never *possessed* before."

"Then how do I—?"

"It's just a matter of trial and error until you figure out how to manipulate them."

Lennox concentrated.

"Did anything move this time?" he asked.

"Not yet."

He tensed and grunted. "How about now?"

Belmonte shook his head. "All you're doing is flexing your shoulders."

"I'm using every muscle I have," complained Lennox. "They must have been attached wrong."

"Just keep trying."

He made another effort.

"Nothing," said Belmonte.

"Damn. I'll never get them to move."

But eventually he did.

"What do you think of it?" asked Belmonte, indicating the Firefly food that Lennox was eating.

"Pretty good, actually."

"How does it compare to human meals?"

"It's not steak, but it'll do."

At dinner Lennox was given a steak. He took two bites and promptly vomited.

"I think we're making progress," said Belmonte, as Lennox glared at him furiously through his orange alien eyes.

"All right," said Beatrice Ngoni. "Let's try out your new voice."

"Ready when you are," said Lennox.

She turned questioningly to Belmonte.

"There's something just a little wrong with the tone," he said.

"In what way?"

Belmonte frowned. "It should be . . . *deeper* isn't the word . . . more *resonant*."

"Give me a while," said Lennox. "I've only spoken one sentence."

"Any better?" asked Beatrice.

"I can't be sure," replied Belmonte.

"I want you to speak to him all afternoon, until his voice gives out," she said. "If at any point the pitch and tone seem right to you, call me immediately. We'll record the entire session. Once we know exactly how it should sound, we can make minor adjustments during the next surgery."

"I can't speak all afternoon," protested Lennox. "My throat hurts already."

Beatrice waited for Belmonte to translate, then turned to Lennox.

"Your throat is sore from the surgery, not from speaking the Brakkanan dialect. As you become tired, your voice will vary in pitch and strength. All we need is for Major Belmonte to let us know when it sounds proper, even for just a sentence or two, and we can make any correction that is required."

"So what would you like to talk about?" asked Belmonte when the two of them were alone.

"Torture."

"Torture?" he repeated, surprised. "Do you have any victim in mind?"

"Let's start with Beatrice Ngoni."

His new teeth came next, followed by two internal organs whose function remained a mystery to him. He spent several sessions adjusting to his night vision, which was far superior to that of humans. His new ears were capable of hearing high-pitched sounds that were beyond the range of human hearing.

The next-to-last surgery replaced his genitals—he had been allowed to keep them as long as possible for psychological reasons, and he surprised everyone by not showing the least discomfort or dismay over his new spikelike sex organ.

The glowing skin remained a problem, and eventually it was decided to give him an entirely new epidermis, with internal triggers that could increase or moderate the degree of brightness; it took him almost two weeks to learn how to work the triggers. Finally they implanted yet another artificial organ, one that could absorb the phosphorescent excretion through his artificial skin whenever he willed it. That took him another ten days to master.

But finally, after slightly more than five Galactic Standard months, the newly minted Firefly named Xavier William Lennox was deemed ready for duty, and boarded a ship for distant Medina.

His excitement over his imminent return to the planet was only minimally greater than his happiness at leaving Beatrice Ngoni and her colleagues behind. ♦

AMAZING[®]

STORIES

**Back issues and anthologies
available by mail order**

If you'd like to catch up on your reading of the world's first—and the world's finest—science fiction magazine, we have an extensive selection of recent back issues available direct from the source by mail order.

Every magazine published for the last four years is still in stock, except for the December 1992 issue—but several others are in short supply. The available magazines include:

- Digest-sized issues that were published every other month from May 1990 through March 1991, priced at \$2.25 each;
- Full-sized issues, with color illustrations accompanying every piece of fiction, that were published monthly from May 1991 through Winter 1994, priced at \$5.00 each, as is the Spring 1994 issue;
- Digest-sized issues dated September 1972, January 1973, August 1973, and November 1978, priced at \$1.75 each.

Also available in limited supply are seven anthologies that were published by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, most of which feature reprints of classic fiction from AMAZING Stories and its companion magazine *Fantastic*. These anthologies include:

- Four trade paperback books (*AMAZING Stories: 60 Years of the Best Science Fiction*; *AMAZING Stories: Visions of Other Worlds*; *FANTASTIC[™] Stories: Tales of the Weird & Wondrous*; and *Cinemonsters*), each priced at \$8.00;

- Three paperback collections of fiction from the first three decades of AMAZING Stories (*The Wonder Years: 1926-1935*; *The War Years: 1936-1945*; and *The Wild Years: 1946-1955*), each priced at \$4.00.

To order any of these magazines or books, simply total the price of all the merchandise you want—postage and handling is included in these prices—and send your order along with payment to AMAZING Stories, P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147. Every order will be processed the same day it is received, and will be shipped via third-class mail or UPS ground service.

For a complete detailed list of all the magazines and books, including some specific information about the contents of each publication, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the address above and we'll mail the list back to you the same day your request arrives.



The sweeping saga of honor, courage, and
companions begins with . . .

The Chronicles Trilogy

By *The New York Times* best-selling authors
Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman



Dragons of Autumn Twilight

Volume One

Dragons have returned to Krynn with a vengeance. An unlikely band of heroes embarks on a perilous quest for the legendary *Dragonlance*!

TSR #8300

ISBN 0-88038-173-6



Dragons of Winter Night

Volume Two

The adventure continues . . . Treachery, intrigue, and despair threaten to overcome the Heroes of the Lance in their epic quest!

TSR #8301

ISBN 0-88038-174-4



Dragons of Spring Dawning

Volume Three

Hope dawns with the coming of spring, but then the heroes find themselves in a titanic battle against Takhisis, Queen of Darkness!

TSR #8302

ISBN 0-88038-175-2

Sug. Retail Each \$4.95; CAN \$5.95; £4.99 U.K.